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HELD IN BONDAGE

OR

GRANVILLE DE VIGNE.

A TALE OF THE DAY.

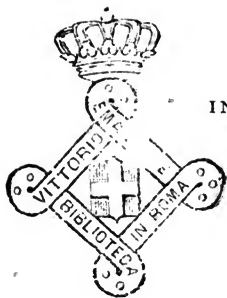
BY

OUIDA,

AUTHOR OF "PASCAREL," "PUCK," "STRATHMORE," ETC.

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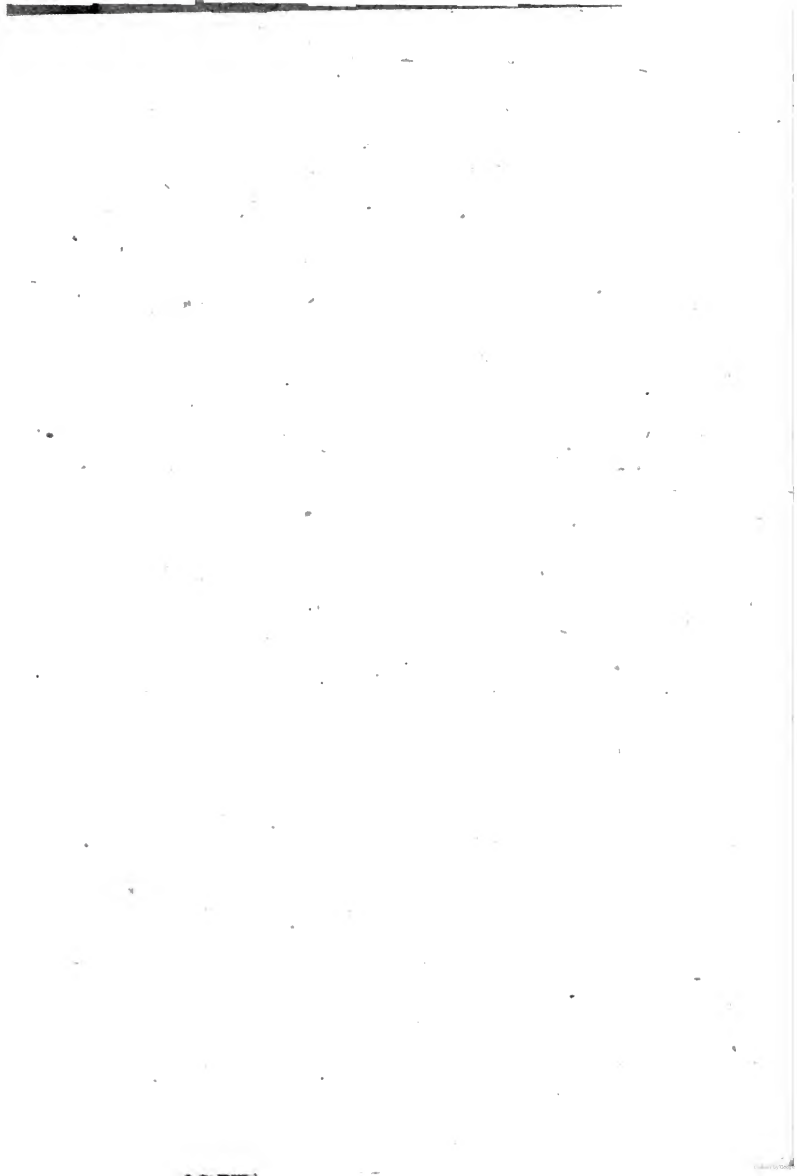
IN TWO VOLUMES.—VOL. II.



LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1873.



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HELD IN BONDAGE.

CHAPTER I.

How the olden Delirium awoke like a Giant from his Slumbers.

THE Molyneux rooms in Lowndes Square were full, not crowded; the Viscountess knew too well the art of society to cram her apartments, as is the present habitude, till lords and ladies jostle and crush one another like so many Johns and Marys crowding before a fair—the rooms were full, and “brilliantly attended,” as the morning papers had it next day, for though they were of the fourth order of nobility, the Molyneux had as exclusive a set as any in town, and knew “everybody.” “Everybody!” Comprehensive yet exclusive phrase! meaning, in *their* lips, just the *crème de la crème*, and nothing whatever below it; meaning, in a Warden’s, all his Chapter; in a schoolgirl’s, all her school-fellows; in a leg’s, all the “ossy-men;” in an author’s, those who read him; in a painter’s, those who praise him; in a rector’s, those who testimonialize and saint him! In addition to the *haute volée* of fashion there was the *haute volée* of intellect at the Viscountess’s Reception, for Lady Molyneux dearly loved to have a lion (though whether a writer who honours the nations, or an Eastern prince in native ugliness and jewellery, was perhaps immaterial to her!); and many of our best authors and artists were not only acquaintances of hers, but intimate friends of Sabre-

tasche's, who at any time threw over the most aristocratic crush for the simplest intellectual réunion, preferring, as he used to say, the God-given cordon of Brain to the ribbons of Bath or Garter.

I went there early, leaving a dinner-party in Eaton Square sooner than perhaps I should have done, from a trifle of curiosity I felt to see how the "Little Tressillian" comported herself in her new sphere; and I confess I did not expect to see her quite so thoroughly at home, and quite so much of a star in her own way as I found her to be. I have told you she had nothing of Violet's regular and perfect beauty—regular as a classic statue, perfect as an exquisitely-tinted picture—yet, somehow or other, Alma *told* as well in her way as the lovely Irish belle in hers; told even better than the Lady Ela Ashburnington; our modern Medici Venus—but who, alas! like the Venus, never opens those perfectly-chiselled lips; or the exquisite Mrs. Tite Delafield,—whose form would rival Canova's Pauline, if it weren't made by her *couturière*: or even Madame la Duchesse de la Vieille-cour, now that—ah me!—the sweet rose bloom is due to Palais Royal shops, and the once innocent lips only breathe coquetries studied beforehand, while her maid brushes out her long hair, and Gwen—pshaw! Madame la Duchesse—glances alternately from Octave Feuillet's or Feydeau's last novel to her Dresden-framed mirror.

Yes, Alma won upon all; whether it was her freshness, whether it was her natural abandon, whether it was her unusual talent, wit, and gay self-possession (for if there is a being on earth whom I hate, 'tis Byron's "bread-and-butter miss"), I must leave undetermined. Probably, it was that nameless something which one would think Mephistopheles himself had given some women, so surely and so unreasoningly do men go down

before it, whether they will or no. The women sneered at her, and smiled superciliously, but that was of course! See two pretty women look at each other—there is defiance in the mutual regard, and each thinks in her own heart, "*Je vais me frotter contre Wellington!*" One might have imagined that those high-bred beauties, with their style and their Paris dress, their acknowledged beauty, and their assured conquests, could well have spared Alma a few of the leaves out of their weighty bay wreaths. Yet I believe in my soul they grudged her even the stalks, and absolutely condescended to honour her with a sneer (surest sign of feminine envy) when they saw not only a leaf or two, but a good many garlands of rose and myrtle going to her in the Olympic game of "Shining."

An R. A. complimented her on her talent, a Cabinet minister smiled at her repartee, a great *littérateur* exchanged mots with her, Curly fell more deeply in love with her than ever, Castleton was rapturous about her feet, very blasés men about town went the length of exciting themselves to ask her to dance, and Attachés and Guardsmen warmed into stronger admiration than their customary *nil admirari*-ism usually permitted about her. Yet she bent forward to me as I approached her with a very eager whisper:

"Oh, Captain Chevasney! isn't Major De Vigne coming?"

I really couldn't tell her, as I had not seen him all day, save for a few minutes in Pall Mall; and the disappointment on her face was amusing. But a minute afterwards her eyes flashed, the colour deepened in her cheeks.

"There he is!" she said, with an under-breath of delight. And her attention to Curly, and Castleton, and the other men, began to wander considerably.

There he was, leaning against the doorway, looking bored, I was going to say, but that is rather too affected a thing, and not earnest nor ardent enough for any feeling of De Vigne's; it was rather the look of a man too impatient and too spirited for the quiet trivialities around him, who would prefer "fierce love and faithless war" to drawing-room flirtations and polite character-damning; the look of a horse who wants to be scenting powder and leading a charge, and is ridden quietly along smooth downs where nothing is stirring, with a curb which he does not relish. Ostensibly, he was chatting with a member of the Lower House; absolutely, he was watching Alma with that look in his eyes, caused, I think, by a certain peculiarity of dropping the lashes over them when he was angry, which made me fancy he was not overpleased to see the men crowding round the little lady.

"He won't come and speak to me. Do go and ask him to come," whispered Alma, confidentially, to me.

I laughed—he had not been more than three minutes in the room!—and obeyed her behest.

"Your little friend wants you to go and talk to her, De Vigne."

He glanced towards her.

"She is quite as well without any attention from me, considering the reports that have already risen concerning us, and she seems admirably amused as it is."

"Halloa! are we jealous?"

"Jealous! Of what pray!" asked my lord, with supreme scorn.

And moving across the room at once in Alma's direction (without thinking of it, I had suggested the very thing to send him to her, in sheer defiance), he joined the group gathered round the Little Tressillian, whose

radiant smile at his approach made Castleton sneer and poor Curly swear *sotto voce* under his moustaches. De Vigne, however, did not say much to her; he shook hands with her, said one or two things, and then talking with Tom Sévern (whom Alma had attracted to her side) about the ties shot off at Hornsey Wood that morning, left the little lady so much to the other men, that though he was within a yard of her, she thought she preferred him in her studio at St. Crucis than in the crowded salons of that "set" of his in which she had wished to meet him.

De Vigne talked to those about him, but he meanwhile watched her dancing, lightly and gracefully as a Spanish girl or an Eastern bayadère; watched her, the fact dawning on him, with a certain warning thrill, that she was not, after all, a little thing to laugh at, and play with, and pet innocently, as he did his spaniel, but a woman, as dangerous to men as she was attractive to them, who could no more be trifled with without the trifling falling back again upon the trifier than absinthe can be drunk like water, or opium eaten long without delirium.

Certain jealousies surged up in his heart, certain embers that had slumbered long began to quicken into flame; the blood that he had tried to chill into ice-water rushed through his veins with something of its natural rapidity and fire. He had pooh-poohed Sabretasche's earnest and my half-laughing counsels; he now heeded as little what ought to have roused him much more, the throbs of his own heart, and the passions stirring into life within him.

She was a child; his own honour was guard sufficient against love growing up between them. So he would have said if he had ever reasoned on it. But he was not cold enough for such self-examination, and even

now, though jealousy was waking up in him, he was wilfully blind to it, and to the irritation, which the sight of the other men crowding round and claiming her excited in him.

"Don't you mean to dance with me?" whispered Alma, piteously, as he passed her after the waltz was over.

"I seldom dance," he answered.

It was the truth: waltzing used to be a passion with him, but since the Trefusis had waltzed his reason away, the dance had brought disagreeable associations with it.

"But you *must* waltz with me!"

"Hush! All the room will hear you," said De Vigne, smiling in spite of himself. "Let me look at your list, then!"

"Oh, I would not make any engagements. I might have been engaged ten deep, but I kept them all free for you."

"May I have the honour of the next waltz with you, then, Miss Tressillian?" asked De Vigne, in a louder tone, for the benefit of the people round.

As he put his arm round her, and whirled her into the circle, he remembered, with a shudder at the memory, that the last woman he had waltzed with was the Trefusis. In India wilder sports and more exciting amusements had filled his time, and since he had been in England he had chiefly frequented men's society.

"You had my note, Sir Folko?" was Alma's first question. "I could never thank you for your beautiful gifts, I could never tell you what happiness they gave me."

"You have said far more than enough, petite," said De Vigne, hastily.

"No," persisted Alma, "I could *never* say enough to thank you for all your lavish kindness to me."

"Nonsense," laughed De Vigne. "I have given jewels to many other women, Alma, but none of them thought they had any need to feel any gratitude to me. The gratitude they thought was due to *them* for having allowed me to offer them the gift!"

He spoke with something of a sneer, from the memory of how—to him, at least—women high and low, had ever been cheap, and worthless as most cheap things are; and the words cast a chill over his listener. For the first time the serpent entered into Alma's Eden—entered, as in Milton's apologue, with the first dawning knowledge of Passion. Unshed tears sprang into her eyes, making them flash and gleam as brilliantly as the gems he had given her.

"If you did not give them from kindness," she said, passionately, "take them back. My happiness in them is gone."

"Silly child!" said De Vigne, half smiling at her vehement tones. "Should I have given them to you if I had not cared to do so? On the contrary, I am always glad to give you any pleasures if I can. But do you suppose, Alma, that I have gone all my life without giving presents to any one till I gave them to you?"

Alma laughed, but she looked, half vexed, up in his face even still:

"No, I do not, Sir Folko; but you should not give them to me *as* you gave them to other women, any more than you should class me with other women. You have told me you did not."

"My dear Alma, I cannot puzzle out all your wonderful distinctions and definitions," interrupted De Vigne, hastily. "Have you enjoyed the evening as much as you anticipated?"

"Oh, it is delightful!" cried the little lady, with that

rapid alternation from sorrow to mirth due to her extreme susceptibility to external impressions.

De Vigne raised his eyebrows, and interrupted her again, somewhat unwarrantably:

"You are a finished coquette, Alma."

Her blue eyes opened wide under their black lashes.

"Sir Folko! I?"

"Yes, you. I am not finding fault with you for it. All women are who can be. I only wonder where, in your seclusion, you have learned all those pretty wiles and ways that women, versed in society from their childhood, fail to acquire. Who has taught you all those dangerous tricks, from whom have you imitated your skill in captivating Curly and Castleton and Severn, and all those other men, however different their styles or tastes? You are an accomplished flirt, petite, and I congratulate you on your proficiency."

He spoke with most unnecessary bitterness, much more than he was conscious of, and certainly much more than he ought to have used, for the Little Tresillian was just as much of a coquette—if you like to call it so—and no more of one than De Vigne in reality liked; for he measured women by their power of fascination. But now the devil of jealousy had entered into him.

Her eyes flashed, her lips quivered a little; Alma was not a woman to sit down tranquilly under injustice; her nature was too passionate not to be indignant under accusation, though it was at the same time much too tender not to forgive it as rapidly where she loved the offender.

"For shame, Sir Folko! 'Coquette!' I have heard you use that word to women you despise. Coquette, I have heard you say, means one to whom all men are

equal. I thank you greatly for your kind opinion of me!"

"Hush, hush! Heaven knows that was far from my thoughts! Forgive me, I know you have no artifice or affectation, and I should never attribute them to you. Let nothing I say vex you. If you knew all, you would not wonder that I am sceptical and suspicious, and sometimes perhaps unjust."

He spoke kindly, gently, almost fondly. He was angry with himself for having spoiled her unclouded pleasure. She looked up in his face with a saddened, reproachful tenderness, which had never been in her eyes before, different to their impetuous vexation, different still to their frank, affectionate confidence:

"Yes; but trust *me* at least, if you doubt all the world!"

"I do!"

He spoke in a low whisper, her heart throbbing against his, her breath upon his cheek, his hand closing tight upon hers in the caress of the waltz; and with the voluptuous swell of the music, the tender and passionate light of the eyes that were lifted to his, for the first time there awoke, and trembled in them both, the dawn of that passion which the one had never before known, which to the other had been so fierce and fatal a curse.

At that moment the music ceased: De Vigne gave her his arm in silence, and soon after seated himself by her on one of the couches, while other men came round her, taking ices and talking the usual ball-room chit-chat. It was strange how much that single evening did for Alma; she was admired, courted, followed; she learnt her own power, she received the myrtle crown due to her own attractions, to the grace and talent of Nature she seemed to acquire the grace and talent of Society,

and to the charming and winning ways of her girlhood she added the witchery, wit, and fascination of a woman of the world. In that one night she grew tenfold more attractive than before; she was like a bird, who never sings so well till he has tried his wings.

Not even Lady Ela, or Madame la Duchesse, had more men anxious for the pleasure of taking them to their carriages than the young *débutante*. Curly's soft words pleaded for the distinction; Tom Severn would fain have had it; Castleton tried hard to give her his arm; but De Vigne kept them all off, and took her down with that tranquil appropriateness which he thought his intimacy with her would warrant. He would not have been best pleased if he had heard the laugh and the remarks that followed them, from the men that were on the staircase watching the women leave! The gas-light shone on her eyes, as she leaned forwards in the carriage, and put out both her hands to him.

"Sir Folko! if I could but thank you as I feel!"

"If I could but prove to you you have nothing to thank me for!"

"At least, I have all the happiness that is in my life!"

"Happiness? Hush!" said De Vigne, passionately. "How can you tell but that some day you may hate me, loathe me, and wish to God that we had never met?"

"I? O Heaven! no. If I were to die by your hand, I would pray with my latest breath that God might bless you."

"You would? Poor child! Alma, good night!"

"Good night."

Those two good nights were very soft and low-spoken with a more tender intonation than any words that had ever passed between them. His hands closed

tightly upon hers; the love of woman, his favourite toy in early youth, the stake on which he risked so much in early manhood, was beguiling him again. His head was bent so that his lips almost touched her brow; perhaps they might have touched, and lingered there—but, “Way for the Duchesse de Vieillecour’s carriage!” was shouted; the coachman started off his horses, and De Vigne stood beneath the awning, with the bright gas glare around and the dark street beyond him, while his heart stirred and his pulses quickened as, since his marriage-day, he had vowed they never should again for any woman’s sake.

He walked home alone, without waiting for his night-cab, or, indeed, remembering it, smoking as he paced the streets, forsaken in the early morning save by some wretched women reeling out of a gin-palace, or some groups quitting a casino with riotous mirthless laughter. He walked home, restless, impatient, ill at ease, with two faces before him haunting him as relentlessly as in the phantasmagoria of fever—the faces of the Trefusis and of Alma—the one with her sensual, the other with her spiritual loveliness; the one who had destroyed his youth, the other who had given it back to him, side by side in their startling and forcible contrast, as in the Eastern fable the good angel sits on the right shoulder and the bad angel on the left, neither leaving us, each pursuing us throughout the day and night.

CHAPTER II.

The Cost of Honour.

THE ball at Lady Molyneux’s was on the 25th of June. On the day after, just a fortnight before the 10th, which was fixed as his marriage-day, Sabretasche gave a fête

at his Dilcoosha. That exquisite place, which had always reminded me of Vathek and of Fonthill, it had been a whim of his to embellish in every possible way before his engagement; and now he seemed to take a delight in making Violet's home as luxurious as his wealth and his art could combine to render it. I went over it with him one day, and I told him that if ever I wanted to do up old Longholme as lavishly, I hoped he would come and act as superintendent of the works. Certainly, if Violet had married the highest peer in the realm, she could not have had a more lovely shrine than the Dilcoosha. Regalia's grim and grand old castle in Merionethshire would have looked very dull and dark after Sabretasche's villa. The grounds were artificially made as wild and luxuriant as any woodland in the heart of the provinces, while yet all the resources of horticulture were lavished on them. The conservatories excelled Chatsworth's; with here and there, among their glories of blossom and colouring, a marble group or a single statuette, such as the rifling of Parisian, and Florentine, and Roman studios could give him. The suite of drawing-rooms opened out of them, a soft, demi-lumière streaming through rose-hued glass on a thousand gems of art that were gathered in them. Violet's morning room (I hate the word "boudoir;" stockbrokers' Hackney or Peckham villas boast their "boudoirs," and tradesmen's wives sit puffing under finery in "boudoirs," while their lords take invoices in white aprons, or advertise their "Nonpareil trousers," their genuine Glenlivet, or *ne plus ultra* coats!) was hung in pale green and gold, with a choice library collected in quaint mediæval book-stands, the deep bay-window opening on to the river view the grounds afforded, the walls painted in illustration of Lallah Rookh, and the greatest gems the

house contained in sculpture or in art shrined here in her honour. Her bedroom and her dressing-room were unrivalled; the bed was of carved ivory, the curtains of rose silk and white lace, caught up by a chain of flowers, moulded and chased in silver; all the hangings of the rooms were rose and silver, while silver lamps swung from the ceiling, giving out perfume as they burned. It was a home fit for an imperial bride.

On the 26th Sabretasche gave a fête at the Dilcoosha, a day to be spent, according to Violet's programme, so that, as she said, "she might catch a glimpse of the Summer, and forget the Season for an hour or two;" and as the Colonel's Dilcoosha was known to afford, if anything could, the requisites for enjoying a long day, no one, even the most *ennuyé*, was bored at the prospect, especially as his invitations were invariably very exclusive, and I know people who would rush into that quarter where is written—

Lasciate ogni speranza, o voi ch'entrate.

if the admissions were exclusive; and would decline Paradise if its golden gates were opened to the multitude!

The luncheon was gay and brilliant; repartee flowed with the still *Al*, and mots sparkled with the *Johannisberg*. Sabretasche showed nowhere to better advantage than as a host; his Chesterfield courtesy, his graceful urbanity, his careful attention to everybody, and every trifle, above all, his art in starting conversation and drawing people out, always made parties at his house more charming than at any other.

During the luncheon De Vigne sat next to Leila Puffdoff, who, as I have before hinted, was willing to make more love to him than Granville cared to make to her. De Vigne was much set upon by fine ladies, and she

flirted with him desperately during the luncheon, and made him row her on the river afterwards, part of the grounds of the Dilcoosha sloping downwards to the Thames, and drooping their willow and larch boughs into the water. De Vigne took the sculls, as in duty bound, and rowed her a good way down, under the arching branches; but though Lady Puffdoff put out all her charms, she could not lure him into anything as warm or tender as she would have liked; she was piqued—possibly what he wished to make her—bid him scull her back to the Dilcoosha, and, as soon as she was landed, went off to listen to Gardoni, with Crowndiamonds, Castleton's eldest brother. De Vigne was profoundly thankful to be released; he had a fancy to leave all these people and scenes, which were so stale, and go where his heart inclined him, go and see Alma Tresillian.

He knew the way by the river to St. Crucis; took the oars of the little boat which the Countess had just vacated, and pulled himself up Thames to a point where he knew a path led to the farm-house, as he had once or twice walked down to the bank with Alma by it, and rowed her a mile or so on the water; amused with *her* amusement in seeing those steamers, barges, and cockle-shell boats in which Cockneys love to disport themselves on that unodoriferous stream.

He moored the boat to the bank, thinking of the careless days when he had pulled up the river with the Eton Eight, enjoying the glories of success at the Brocas and Little Surley; and walked onwards to St. Crucis, with that swinging cavalry step which had beaten many good pedestrians and stalwart mountain guides in both hemispheres. He strode along, too, to uneasy thoughts; he was conscious of a keener desire to see the Little

Tressillian than he would confess to himself, and, at the same time, he had a remorseful conviction that it might be better to stay away, a suggestion to which he was equally reluctant to listen. A quarter of an hour brought him in sight of St. Crucis; but with that sight he saw, too—Curly, who had apparently forsaken the Dilcoosha for the same purpose as himself. Curly had just pushed open the gate and entered, as if he liked his destination; and De Vigne paused a moment behind him, under the road-side trees, wavering in his mind whether he should follow him or not. Where he stood he could see the garden, in all its untrained profuse summer beauty; the great chesnuts, with their snowy blossoms, that the wind was scattering over the turf beneath; and under the trees he saw Alma, and beside her, bending eagerly forward, Vane Castleton! He, too, then, had left Sabretasche's fête to find his way after Alma. "Curse the fellow!" swore De Vigne, in his teeth, "how dare he come after her?" If he had followed his instinct, he would have taken Castleton up by his coat-collar and kicked him out of the garden like a dog; though probably, for that matter, Castleton had as much right there as himself.

Curly had pushed open the gate and entered, and Alma, catching sight of him as he went across the garden, sprang up, left Castleton rather unceremoniously, and came to meet him with a glad greeting, and something of that gay, bright smile which De Vigne liked to consider his own and his unshared property. Curly answered it with an air more tender than mere compliment, and sat down beside her, giving Castleton such a glance as a man only gives to a rival who has forestalled him.

De Vigne took in the whole scene at a glance, and construed it, as his scepticism and his knowledge of women suggested to him. The darker



character rose up; the venom of jealousy entered into him again.

"She is a thorough-paced coquette, like all the rest," he thought. "I will not add another to the fools who pander to her vanity."

He swung round and retraced his steps, leaving Alma sitting under her chesnut with Castleton and Curly. It cut him to the soul that those men should be near her, teaching her the power, and, with the power, the artifices of her sex, gaining—who could say they would not, one or other of them?—their way into her heart! He was mad with himself for the jealousy he felt; and fiercely and futilely he tried to persuade himself, tried till at last he succeeded, that it was but his regret at the inevitable fate which would await Boughton Tressillian's adopted child if she listened to the love of Castleton, or even of Curly; for Curly, though frankhearted and honourable as a man could be, was young, wild, and held women lightly.

All the fire which lay asleep under the armour of ice which he had put on to guard himself from a sex that had wronged him, was stirred and kindled into flame. He might as yet seek to give them, and to conceal them to himself under, other names, but at work within were his old foes—jealousy and passion. The gay glitter of society, as he joined a group under the fragrant limes of the Dilcoosha, where Violet, Madame de la Vieillecour, and others, were competing in skill as Toxophilites for the prizes Sabretasche had rifled from Howell and James's stores, seemed strangely at variance with the tempest working up in his heart; and while he laughed and jested with the women there, he could not forget for one instant the Little Tressillian, as he left her smiling on those men! It was a far greater relief to him than he

would own to himself, when not long afterwards he saw Castleton discussing the merits and demerits of her bow with Ela Ashburnington; and in half an hour's time, or a trifle more, heard Curly chatting frothy badinage with Mrs. Tite Delafield; though, following the dictate of his nature, there was no bodily injury he could not have found it in his heart to wreak upon them both, even on his own Frestonhills pet, for having won those gay bright smiles under the chesnuts at St. Crucis.

He would scarcely have been less wrathful if he had heard Crowndiamonds saying to his brother,

"Where the deuce have you been to, Vane? Helena sent me to look for you, but I couldn't find you anywhere."

"I was after something far prettier than the old woman," was Castleton's graceful reply.

"Helena" was nobody less than my Lady Molyneux, with whom this noble scion of the House of Tiara had been *lié* in a closer friendship than Jockey Jack would have relished had he not been taught to take such friendships as matters of course.

"I have been to see that little girl Tressillian—called to look at her pictures, of course; studios are deuced nice excuse, by Jove!"

And Lord Vane curled his whiskers and laughed at some joke not wholly explained.

"What, that little thing who was at Helena's last night," asked Crowndiamonds, "that you and the other fellows made such a fuss about? Heaven knows why! she's too petite for me. Besides, somebody said she was De Vigne's property!"

"What if she were? If he don't take care of his game, other men may poach it, mayn't they?"

Meanwhile that summer day passed away in colours

to Violet as glorious as those that tinged its evening sky when the sun went down behind the limes. Bright as the western light were her present and her future; secure she dreamed from the grey twilight or the starless night, which overshadow the brightest human life, not less surely than they overtake the fairest summer day. Of twilight taint, much less of midnight shadow, Violet knew no fear. I have never seen on earth—not even imagined in song nor idealised in art—any face so expressive of brilliant youth as hers. When it was in repose there was the light of a smile on her lips; and the joyousness of the spirit within seemed to linger far down in the sunny depths of her eyes, as on the violet waves of the Mediterranean we have seen the gleam and the glow of the rays from a sunrise hidden from our view. There was something in her face that touched the most cynical amongst us, and subdued the most supercilious or systematic of all those women of the world into a vague regret for the spring time of their days, when they, too, were in their golden hours, and they, too, believed in Love and Life.

Never had Violet given freer rein to the joyous spirits of her nature than on that day; never had he more completely surrendered himself to the new happiness he had won! He loved her with a strangely tender love. He loved her, as we love very rarely, for

As those who dote on odours pluck the flowers,
And place them on their breast, but place to die;
Thus the frail beings we should fondly cherish
Are laid within our bosoms but to perish!

He loved her *better* than himself.

"Ah! Violet, Time has leaden wings!" he whispered to her as, when they escaped unnoticed from the crowd, he led her through her own apartments, locked to the ingress of others. "A fortnight is not long, yet to me,

while it keeps you from me, it seems eternity! 'Would to God you were mine now!'

The soft hue that wavered in her cheeks, the low sigh, love's tenderest interpreter, that parted her lips, re-echoed his wish, though words were silent!

"You will love me thus always, Vivian," she whispered, "never less tenderly, never less warmly, never calmly, chilly, as men learn, they say, to love women whom they have won?"

"Never, my own love! Calm, chill affections were death to me as to you. My love has ever been as warm as my native Southern suns; for you it will be as eternal."

"Then what can part us?" murmured Violet, lifting her face to his, with a smile upon her lips, and in her eyes the joy secure from all terror and all tarnish. "No power on earth! And so well do we love, that if death took one, he would strike the other!"

"Hush!" whispered Sabretasche, fondly. "Why speak of death or sorrow, my dearest? Our fate is life and joy; and life and joy together! We love; and in that word all happiness earth can know is given to us both."

He paused, and the silence that is sweeter than any words supplied his broken words—cold interpreters at best, of the heart's most eloquent utterances.

When all his other guests had left the Dilcoosha, Lady Molyneux gave him the third seat in her carriage back to town. The summer dawn was very bright and still, with not a trace of human life abroad, save in some gardeners' carts wending their way slowly to Covent Garden with their fresh pile of newly-gathered vegetables or fragrant load of nodding hothouse flowers—flowers destined to wither in the soft, cruel hand of some jewelled beauty, or droop and die, pining for their native sun-

light, under the smoke-shroud of the Great City, as sweet natures and warm hearts shrink or harden, under the blight of a chill world, or the pressure of an uncongenial existence. There was no sign of human life, but the birds were lifting up sweet gushes of natural song, the dew was among the daisied grass, and the southerly wind was tossing the wayside boughs up in its play, and filling the air with a fragrance, brought miles and miles on its rapid wings from the free, fresh woodlands far away.

There was a soft beauty in the summer dawn that chimed sweet cadence with their thoughts as Violet and Sabretasche drove homewards; while Lady Molyneux—worked throughout the season for fashion's sake as hard as Hood's poor shirt-maker for very life—slept, though she would have denied it, tranquilly and well. They enjoyed the sweet daybreak as people do whose hearts are full of gladness; she, with that love of all fair things and that susceptibility to externals natural to youth and to a heart which has never yet known care; he, with that poetic keenness to all things in life and nature which had in boyhood made the mere murmur of the Mediterranean waves, or the setting of the sun, or the sighing of winds among the olive-groves, pleasure to his senses. When the future is fair to us, how fair looks the green and laughing earth!

And she looked up in her lover's eyes:

"Oh, Vivian, how beautiful is life!"

"With love!"

Life and love were both beautiful to him as he whispered a farewell but for a few hours in Violet's ear, bent his head for one soft hurried kiss from the lips whose caresses were consecrated to him, and descended from the carriage at the door of his house in Park-lane:

It was past six o'clock when he reached his home, and threw himself down on one of the couches of that favourite room of his on the ground-floor, which adjoined and opened into his studio, where the morning light fell full on his easel, on a portrait of Violet in pastel. He lay smoking his narghilé with that voluptuous indolence habitual to him—looking at the picture where his own art had recreated the beauty of his young love—feeling in memory the loving, lingering touch of her lips—and dreaming over that fresh happiness whose solitary reveries were dearer to him now than society or sleep.

His life had never seemed so sweet, the peace he had won so perfect; and when his servant rapped gently at the door, though infinitely too sweet-tempered, and, truth to tell, too lazy, to irritate himself about trifles, he was annoyed to be disturbed.

"I told you not to interrupt me till I rang for my chocolate."

"I beg your pardon, Colonel," answered his man, submissively. "I should not, but there is a person asking to see you upon business, and as he said it was of great importance, I did not know, sir, what would be best to do."

"What is always best to do is to obey me to the letter—you can never be wrong then. The person could have waited. What is his name?"

"He would not give it, sir; he wished to see you."

"I see no one before two o'clock in the day. Go tell him so."

The man obeyed; but in a minute or two he returned.

"The gentleman will take no denial, Colonel. He begs you to see him."

"What an impertinent fellow!" said Sabretasche, with

surprise. "Tell him I will *not* see him, that is sufficient. I see no one who does not send in his card."

"But, sir—but——"

"Well, what? Speak out," said Sabretasche, irritated at the disturbance. It seemed to let in the disagreeables of outer life.

"But, sir, he says his business concerns you, and—and Miss Molyneux, sir."

The man hesitated—even servants living with Sabretasche caught something of his delicacy and refinement, and he knew intuitively how the mention of her name would annoy his master. A flush of astonishment and anger rose over Sabretasche's forehead. He was but too sensitive over Violet, perhaps, from what he considered as the deep disgrace of his first marriage, and he almost disliked to hear servants' lips breathe his idol's name. "Show him in," he said briefly, signing the man away. His past had been too fateful for him to join in Violet's cloudless and fearless trust in the future. One of the bitterest curses of sorrow is the *fear* that it leaves behind it; making us, with the sweetest cup to our lips, dread the unseen hand that will dash it down, hanging the funeral pall of the past over the most glittering bridal clothes of the present, and poisoning the sunshine that lies before us with the memory of those clouds which, having so often come before, must, it seems to us, come yet again. When sorrow has once been upon us, we have no longer faith in life—we have but Hope, and Hope, God-given as she is, is but fearful, and fluttering, and evanescent at her best.

He lay still; the sunlight falling upon him and upon the brilliant face on the easel at his side. Vulgar and cruel eyes looked in on the scene—at the luxurious and beautiful studio, where every trifle was a gem of art, and

at the man with all his grace and beauty, all his delicate and artistic surroundings: and a vulgar and cruel mind gloated with delight on the desolation and torture it had power to introduce into that peaceful life. Sabretasche lifted his eyes indolently—as he did so the slight flush upon his face died away; he grew pallid as death. For he saw the man who was linked with his hours of greatest shame, of most bitter misery—the brother and the emissary of his faithless wife! Involuntarily he rose, fascinated by the sight of the man connected with the deepest wrong and greatest shame of his life; and the Italian looked at him with a smile that showed his glittering white teeth, as a hound, who has seized the noblest of Highland royals at bay, shows his in the cruel struggle.

“Signor Castrone, this is a very unexpected intrusion,” said Sabretasche, in Italian, with all the loathing that he felt for this scoundrel who had stooped to live upon gold wrung from the husband whom his own sister had wronged. “Your negotiations with me are at an end. Allow me to request you to withdraw,”

“Wait one moment, Signor Sabretasche,” answered the Neapolitan, with a cunning leer in his bright, sharp eyes. “*Are* our negotiations at an end?”

“So entirely, that if you do not leave my presence I shall be compelled to bid my servants make you.”

The Italian laughed. The cold, contemptuous tone stung him, and gave him but the greater *gusto* for his task.

“Not so fast, buon’ amico, not so fast; we are brothers-in-law, remember! It would not do for us to quarrel.”

The blood crimsoned Sabretasche’s face up to his very temples.

“The tie you dare to mention, and appeal to *ought* to be your bitterest disgrace. Since you are dead to

shame, I need feel none for you; and if you do not leave the room, my servants will compel you."

"Per fede!" said the Italian, with a scoffing laugh. "You will scarcely call your household in to witness your connection with me. They can hear the secret if you choose; it matters nothing to me; only I fancied that now, of all times, you would rather have kept it underhand. You are going to be married, caro, I hear, to a lovely English aristocrat—is it so?"

Sabretasche answered nothing, but stretched out his hand to the bell-handle in the wall nearest him. He felt it was beneath him to bandy words with such a man as Giuseppe da' Castrone, who, a sort of gentlemanlike lazaroni, half swindler, half idler, a Southern *Bohémien*, had lived on his wits till he had lost all the traces of better feeling with which he perhaps might have begun life. He touched Sabretasche's wrist as the Colonel's white, slender hand was approaching the bell. Sabretasche flung off the grasp as if it had been pollution; but before he could ring the Neapolitan interposed with a smile, half cunning, half malicious:

"Would it not have been wiser, Eccellenza, before you had taken one wife to have made *sure* you had lost the other?"

Despite his nerve and habitual impassiveness, Sabretasche started: a deadly anguish of dread fastened upon him.

"Yours is a very stale device," he said, calmly. "Too melodramatic to extort money from me. If you want a few scudi to buy you maccheroni, or game away at dominoes, ask for them in plain words, and I may give you them out of charity."

He stood leaning his arm upon the top of his easel; his tall and graceful figure erect; pride, scorn, loathing

written on his features, and in the depths of his eyes; speaking gently and slowly,—but very bitterly!—in his low and silvery voice. The tone, the glance, woke all the malice that slept in the Italian's heart for his sister's high-born and high-souled husband. His eyes glittered like an angry animal's; he dropped the smoother tone which he had used before, for one of coarse and malicious vindictiveness.

“Santa Maria! don't take that proud tone with me, carissimo, or I may make you glad to change it, and turn your threats into prayers! You are not quite so near happiness as you fancy, my fine gentleman. That is your young love's picture, no doubt? Ah! it is a fair face; it will go hard to lose it, I dare say? It would go harder still if the proud, fastidious Vivian Sabretasche were tried for bigamy! It would not look pretty in the London papers, where his name has been so often as a leader of fashion and——”

Before he could end his sentence Sabretasche had sprung at him; rapidly and lightly as a panther, and seized him by the throat.

“Wretch, you lie! How dare you to insult me! By Heaven! if it were not too great honour for you, I would kill you where you stand!”

So fierce was the grasp of his white slender fingers in the passion into which his gentle nature was at length roused, that the Italian, almost throttled, struggled with difficulty from his hold.

“You lie!” said Sabretasche, flinging him off with a force that sent him reeling from him. “The woman whom you dare to recall as my wife is dead!”

“Per Dio, is she? You will find to the contrary, bel signor. Basta! but your hands have no baby's grasp; you had better have joined them in prayer, best brother-

in-law. If you marry the English beauty, you will have two wives on your shoulders, and *one* has been more than you have managed!"

Sabretasche's eyes were fixed upon him, fascinated by horror as an antelope by a rattlesnake. "Two wives—two wives!" he muttered incoherently, like a man in delirium. "She is dead, I tell you—she is dead."

Then the sense, and transparent falsity, of what the Neapolitan had said came clearer to his mind, and, with an effort, he regained his calm and haughty tone, speaking slowly between his teeth. "Signor Castrone, once more I will request you, for your own sake, to leave this house quietly, without compelling me to the force I am loth to use. With her, the grave buries all past errors; but with you, I still shall treat as with any other swindler. I am not a likely person to be terrified by secret inuendoes or open insults. This time I will let you go—you are beneath my anger—but if you intrude yourself into this house, or venture to approach me again, I shall call in the law to rid me of a pest."

Something in his voice, which, soft as it was in his native Italian, bore a subtle magic of command, had awed the coarser nature into silence while he spoke; but when he paused, Castrone broke out into a long, discordant, malicious laugh, jarring like jangled bells upon every nerve and chord in his listener's heart.

"Diavolo! buon' amico, it will be I more likely who will have the law upon *you*! Sylvia is alive—alive! and your lawful wife, from whom nothing but death can ever divorce you. I do not think she loves you well enough, milor, to let another woman reign in her stead, without making you pay the heaviest penalty she can, for your double marriage! Wait! you saw the death of a Sylvia da' Castrone in an Italian paper, I dare say? You had

the certificate of such a death from Naples? Very possibly, but her aunt Sylvia da' Castrone died last May in Naples, and it was her obituary that you saw. If Sylvia died (as Santa Maria forbid!), it would be recorded as what she is, and what she will be while life lasts—the wife of Vivian Sabretasche. She lives—nay, she is in London, ready to proclaim her right to your name to your new love—or, if your union take place before she can do so, she will then prosecute you according to your English law. She was married in England, you remember; she has not lost the certificate, and the register is correct—I saw it but this morning. It is no idle tale, I tell you, buon' amico. I know you too well to try and palm one off upon you unless I could substantiate it. Your wife is alive, cognato mio! I fear me there will be some few difficulties in the way of marrying your young beauty?"

As the Italian spoke, his coarse, malicious laugh, like the hissing of a serpent, falling like seething fire on the listener's heart, Sabretasche stood gazing upon him. In his parted lips, in his eyes wide open with the horror of amazement, on every feature, already blanched and wan, was marked the deadly anguish of despair,—then, as the full meaning of the words he heard cut gradually into his brain, his strength gave way, and he sank down upon his couch, covering his face with his hands, while cold drops of agony stood upon his brow, and a bitter cry broke from the great passion that had grown and strengthened and entwined itself around his heart, till it were easier to drain that heart of its life-blood than its love.

And the Neapolitan stood by, gloating at the ruin he had wrought. He had longed for years to revenge the silent scorn, the cutting contempt, the high-bred

hauteur with which the man upon whose gold he had lived had treated him—he had thirsted for the time to come when Sabretasche should be humbled before him—when it should be his turn to hold the power which could at will remove or let fall the sword that hung above his victim's head—when it should be his to see, writhing in anguish before him, the haughty gentleman at whose glance and whose word he had so often flinched and slunk away. He stood by and watched him, and Sabretasche had forgot all sense of his presence, all memory of the coarse, cruel eyes which looked on the grief of one who so long had persuaded the world that he valued life too little to give it aught but smiles; and Castrone laughed, the laugh of a demon, at his own fell work.

“Milor does not seem charmed to hear of his wife; it does not seem to bring him the connubial rapture one would expect.”

The jeer, the taunt, the mockery of his woe, stung to madness the heart of the man who shrank even from the sympathy of friends, and who had oftentimes won the imputation of callousness of feeling, because he felt too deeply to bear to unveil his sorrows to the glare of daylight and the sneers of men.

Sabretasche started, as at the sharp touch of the knife searching a fresh wound, and shivered as if with the cold of death. He lifted his face, aged in those brief moments as by long years of woe, and *there* the brother of his wife read desolation enough to satiate a fiend.

“If this were your errand,” he said, with effort—and his voice was hollow almost to inarticulateness, “you have no further excuse for intrusion. I shall take means

for verifying your story; and now begone, while I can keep my hands off you."

"Here is your proof, Eccellenza!"

Sabretasche mechanically read the paper held out to him; it contained but two lines.

"If you will, you can see me once more to-day;—but only to remind you that while I live no other can call herself your Wife."

Though he had not seen it for more than twenty long years, he knew the writing to be his wife's. All hope died in him then; he *knew* that she lived—the woman who had wedded him to misery and disgrace; the woman who now came forward, after the absence and the silence of a score of years, to ban him from the better life to which a gentler and a purer hand was about to lead him.

"*I see her!*" he cried, his passionate anguish, his loathing hatred, breaking out in a rapid rush of words, "*I see the woman who disgraced my name, who betrayed my love; who for twenty years has lived upon my gold, yet never addressed to me one word of repentance or remorse; never one word to confess her crimes; never one prayer to ask forgiveness of her sin! I see her! How dares she ask it? How dares she sign herself by the name she has polluted? Go! tell her that I will bribe her no more, that she is free to do her worst that devils can prompt her, that she may proclaim her marriage with me far and wide; I care not! She may write her lying story in all the papers if she will; she may persuade all England and all Italy that she is a fond, deserted wife, and I a cruel, faithless husband; she may bring my name into Law Courts if she choose to sue me for her maintenance; but tell her, once for all, I give her no more bribes. I disown her, though the*

world will not divorce me. Now go; go, I tell you, or by God I will not let you leave in peace!"

The fierce but coward nature of the Neapolitan quailed before the passion of the usually gentle and impassive Englishman. He spoke softly, more timidly, smoothing down the coarseness of his tone.

"But, signore, listen. If you feel thus towards my poor sister, and will not believe that your hatred to her is without cause, would you not rather that the world knew nothing of your marriage?"

"Since it cannot be broken, all the world may know it. I will bribe you no longer. Begone!"

"Nay, one word—but one word, signore. If I could show you how you might still wed your young English love——"

The fierce gesture of the listener warned him to hasten, if he would be heard; and Castrone's instinct told him how sharper than a dagger's thrust, and more bitter than poison to the man of reserve and refinement, was the rending of the veil of the one sacred temple by a coarse and sacrilegious hand!

"Listen," he said, in his sweet, swift language, with a glitter in his keen, bright eyes. "No one living knows of your union with my sister save ourselves; men do not dream that you are married, much less will they think of turning over registers for a date of more than twenty years ago. Your young love, her father, her friend, all your circle, need never know your wife is living unless you or Sylvia, or I tell them. If any question ever arose about your first marriage, your word would be amply sufficient. They would never insult a gentleman like Vivian Sabretasche by doubting him and prying into details of his past! Sylvia and I are poor; per Bacco, she has luxurious habits, and I—an Italian who is noble—

cannot soil his hands with work! Signor mio, we are as poor as the rats in the Vicaria; and if, as you say, you will not support your wife as you have done hitherto, she must apply to your law for maintenance. She *will* do so, and, basta! it is no more than her rights; had she followed my counsels, she would not have let them lie unasserted so long. But she bids me make you this offer. If you will pay us down ten thousand—it is but a drop in the ocean out of all your wealth—we are very moderate; we will bind ourselves by every oath most sacred in your eyes and ours (and we Catholics keep *our* oaths; we are not blasphemers like your churchmen, who kiss the book in courts and perjure themselves five seconds after!) never to reveal your marriage. You may wed your young English aristocrat, she will never know that another lives who might dispute her title. Men say you love her strangely well—and you are more than half Southern, signor; yours will be no calm and frigid happiness, such as content the cold tame English! You need have no scruple, for, since you say you disown her, whatever the law decree, you must feel as divorced as though men's words had unlocked your fetters, and—per Dio! if a score years' separation is not divorce in Heaven's sight, what *is*? Accept our offer—your marriage is virtually dissolved as though no tie of law existed; and long years of love and happiness await you with the woman you idolise! Refuse it, your marriage will be known all over England; and you will see your English love the wedded wife of some other and some happier-fated man! Choose, signor—the choice is very easy—you who have never hesitated to pay any price for Pleasure, will hardly refuse so small a price for Happiness! Choose, signor, you hold the game in your own hands.”

With subtle ingenuity, devilish skill, was the temptation put! The Neapolitan watched the speeding of his poisoned arrows, and saw that they had hit their quarry. Sabretasche leaned against the wall, his lips pressed in to keep down the agony within him to which he would not give vent; a shiver passing over his frame which was burning with feverish passions; he breathed in quick, short gasps, as if panting for very life; while his eyes were fixed on that brilliant face, whose loving gaze turned on him from the canvas, tempted him, how fiercely! how pitilessly! as woman's beauty has ever tempted man's honour to its fall.

There on the lifeless easel beamed the fair, fond face, pleading for her joy and his own. Before him stretched two lives; one radiant and blessed, full of the rest for which his heart was weary, the beloved companionship, that makes existence of beauty and of value; the other desolate, with no release from the chains that fettered him as the bonds which bound the living man to the dead corpse, no relief from the haunting passions, which would burn within, till stilled in the slumber of the grave! All wooed him to the one; all manhood rebelled against the other!

All urged him to listen to his tempter—all—save the honour, which shrank from the stain of a Lie. He had paid down all prices save this for pleasure; he would not pay this now, even though the barter were hell for heaven. His eyes were still fastened upon her picture, and there her own answered his—clear, fond, true, even while tempting him his better angel still. He could not win *her* by wrong, woo *her* with deception; he loved her too well to wed her by a fraud, and the knightly soul that slept beneath the worldly exterior of the man of fashion and of pleasure, revolted from the shame of be-

traying a heart which trusted him, by concealment and by falsehood. He would not give her his name, knowing it was not hers; call her his wife, knowing the title was denied her; live with her day by day, knowing at every moment he had wronged her and deceived her; receive her innocent caresses, with the barrier of that deadly shadow between them, which, if she saw it not, could never leave his sight, nor rid him of its haunting presence. Deadly was the temptation—deadly its struggle. Great drops stood upon his brow, his lips turned white as in the agonies of death, his hands clenched as in the combat with some actual foe, and the anguish of his heart broke out in a bitter moan:

“My God! I have no strength for this!”

“Why endure it, then?” whispered the low, subtle voice of the Italian. “Freedom is in your own hands.”

But the tempter had lost his power!—the man whom the world said denied himself no pleasure and no wish, and called a heartless and selfish libertine, put aside the joys which could only be bought with Dishonour. Again with the spring of a panther he leapt forward; the blood staining his face, and about his lips a black and ghastly hue, as he caught the Italian in his grip:

“Hound! you tempt me to wrong *her*!—take your price!”

He lifted him from the ground with his left hand, opened the door, and threw him down the steps that parted the studio from the corridor. The Italian lay there, stunned with the fall; Sabretasche closed the door upon him, and went in again alone—alone, in what a solitude!

Long hours afterwards he re-issued from his chamber and entered his carriage, drawing down both blinds. A

strange silence fell upon his house; many of his servants loved him, through a service of kindness on the one hand, and fidelity on the other, and they knew that some great sorrow had fallen on their master. The footmen in Lowndes-square, accustomed to his entrance, were about to show him, unasked, to the room where Violet was; but Sabretasche signed them back, and he went up the stairs to her chamber alone. At the door he paused—what wonder? Could his heart but fail him when he was about to quench all radiance from the eyes that took their brightness only from him? to carry the chill of death into a life which had hitherto not known even a passing shade? To say to the woman pledged to be his wife, "I am the husband of another!" It is no exaggeration that he would have gone with thanksgiving to his own grave; life could have no greater bitterness for him than this.

Many moments passed; the time told off by the thick, slow throbs of his heart:—then he opened the door and entered.

She looked up as the handle turned, dropped her book, and sprang forwards, her hands outstretched, her smile full of gladness; not even a trace of long passed shadows on the fair young brow that had never known care, or sorrow, or remorse. In her joy, not noticing the change upon his face, she welcomed him with fond words and fonder caresses, her arms stealing softly round his neck; and each touch of her lips, to him, like scorching fire.

"Oh, Vivian!" she cried, "you said you would be here four hours ago? You know I don't believe in military duties! I should be your only thought."

She looked up in his face as she spoke, and as she did so, her gay smile faded, and the sweet laughter from

her eye was quenched in the shadow that already fell upon her from the curse he bore.

"O Heaven! what is it!" she gasped.

He pressed her in his arms. "Hush, hush, or you will kill me."

Then the colour fled from her face; her eyes grew full of pitiful fear and half-conscious anguish, like a startled deer catching the first distant ring of the hunters' feet. She hid her face upon his breast, and clung to him in dread of the unknown horror.

He held her in his arms as if no earthly power should rend her from him; and his lips quivered with anguish. "I *cannot* tell you—the worst that could happen to us both has come! Would to God that I had died ere I linked your fate to mine!"

Clinging to him more closely, she looked up into his eyes; there she read, or guessed, the truth, and, with a bitter wail, her arms unloosed their clasp, and she sank down from his embrace, lying on the ground in all her delicate beauty, stricken by her great grief, crushed and unconscious, like a broken flower in a tempest.

CHAPTER III.

How a Woman woke Feud betwixt Palamon and Arcite.

CAN you not fancy how eagerly all town, ever on the *qui vive* after scandal and gossip, darted like the vultures on a dying lion on the story of Vivian Sabretasche's marriage? They were so outraged at its having been so long and carefully concealed, that those who collected scandals of their neighbours, as industriously and persistently as Paris chiffoniers their rags, grubbing for them often in quite as filthy places, revenged themselves for the wrong he had done them, by telling it, garbled and

distorted in every way. Heaven knows through whom it first chiefly spread, whether from the lips of my Lady Molyneux, who hated him and loved the telling, or through his wife and her brother, who probably supplied the *Court Talebearer*, the *St. James's Tittletatler*, and such-like journals, with vague, yet damning, versions that appeared in them, of the "Early history of a Colonel in the Queen's Cavalry, well known in fashionable circles as a dilettante, a *lion*, and a leader of ton, who has recently sought the hand of a beautiful daughter of an Irish Peer, and would have led her to the altar in a few days' time, but for the unhappy, yet, considering the circumstances, fortunate discovery of the existence of a first marriage, concealed by Colonel S. for the space of twenty years; during which period, it is said, the unfortunate wife has lived upon extraneous charity, denied even the ordinary necessities of existence by her unnatural husband, who, having wooed her in a passing caprice, abandoned her when one would have supposed his extreme youth might have preserved him from the barbarity, and we, the moral censors of the age, must say, however reluctantly, villainy of such a course!!"

How it spread I cannot say. I only know it flew like wildfire. There were many who hated him, and all his "nearest friends" glutted over the story so long hidden from their inquiring eyes. Old dowagers mumbled it over their whist-tables, married beauties whispered it behind their fans, loungers gossiped of it in club-rooms; and in all was the version different. Men in general took his part; but women—the soft-voiced murderers of so much fair fame—sided, without exception, against him; called him villain! betrayer! all the names in their sentimental vocabulary; pitied his "poor dear wife;" doubted not she was a sweet creature sacrificed and thrown away;

lamented poor darling Violet's fate, sighed over her infatuation for one against whom they had all warned her, and agreed that such a wretch should be excluded from society!

"I knew it!" said Lady Molyneux, with calm satiric bitterness, and that air of superiority which people assume when they give you what Madame de Staël wisely terms that singular consolation, "*Je l'avais bien dit!*" "I knew it—I always told you what would come of that engagement—I was always certain what that man really was. To think of my sweet child running such a risk! If the marriage had taken place before this *éclaircissement*, I positively could not have visited my own daughter! Too terrible—too terrible!"

"If it had, Helena," answered her husband, "I think you might have 'visited' poor Vy without disgrace. She would have been, at least, faithful to *one*, which certain stories would say, my lady, you are not always so careful to be!"

The Viscountess deigned no reply to the coarse insinuation, but covered her face in her handkerchief, only repeating:

"I knew it! I knew it all along! If *I* had had my way, Violet would now be the honoured wife of one of the first Peers of the——"

"If you *did* know it, madame," interrupted Jockey Jack, sharply—"if you did know poor Sabretasche's wife was alive, it's a pity you did not tell us so. I won't have him blamed; I tell you he's a splendid fellow—a splendid fellow—and the victim of a rascally woman. He can't marry Vy, of course—more fools those who make the laws!—but I won't turn my back on him. He's not the only husband who has very good motives for

divorce, though the facts may not be quite clear to satisfy the courts."

With which fling at his wife, Jockey Jack, moved with more or less sympathy from personal motives for his daughter's lover, took his hat and gloves, and banged out of the house, meeting on the door-step the Hon. Lascelles Fainéant, who had received that morning in his Albany chambers a delicate missive from his virtuous Viscountess commencing, "*Ami choisi de mon cœur.*"

So the journals teemed, and the coteries gossiped, of depths they could neither guess at nor understand. Sabretasche's fastidious delicacy could no longer shield him from coarse remark. The marriage which he considered disgrace, the love which he held as the most sacred part of his life, were the themes of London gossip, to be treated with a jeer, or, at best, with what was far more distasteful to him, pity. Scandal was, however, innocuous to him now; he was blind and deaf to all things, save his own anguish, and that of the woman who loved him.

It was piteous, they tell me, to see the change in Violet under the first grief of her life—and such grief! Such a shock from a bright and laughing future to the utter desolation of a beggared present, has before now unseated intellects not perhaps the weaker for their susceptibility. From wild, disconnected utterances of passionate sorrow she would sink into a silent, voiceless suffering, worse to witness than any tears or laments. She would lie in Sabretasche's arms, with her bright-haired head stricken to the dust, uttering low, plaintive moans that entered his very soul with stabs far keener than the keenest steel; then she would cling to him, lifting her blanched face to his, praying to him never to leave her, or shrink still closer to him, wishing she had

died before she had brought sorrow on his head. It must have been a piteous sight—one to ring up from earth to Heaven to claim vengeance against the curse of laws that join hands set dead in wrath against each other, and part hearts formed for each other's joy and linked by holiest love!

It did not induce brain fever, or harm her *so*, belles lectrices. If we went down under every stroke in that way as novelists assume, we should all be loved of Heaven if that love be shown by early graves, as the old Greeks say.

Violet's young life flowed in her veins still purely and strongly under the dead weight that the mind bore. But for a day or so her reason indeed seemed in danger, both were alike perilous to it, her delirious agony or her mute tearless sorrow; and when her mother approached her, pouring in her common-place sympathies, Violet gazed at her with an unconscious look in those eyes, once so radiant with vivid intelligence, which made even Lady Molyneux shudder with a vague terror, and a consciousness of the presence of a grief far beyond her powers to cure or calm. Sabretasche alone had influence over her. With miraculous self-command and self-sacrifice, while his own heart was breaking, he calmed himself to calm her; he alone had any power to soothe her, and he would surrender the right to none.

"You had better not see her again," her father said to him one day—"much better not, for both of you. No good can come of it, much harm may. You will not misunderstand me when I say I must put an end to your visits. It gives me intense regret. I have not known you these past months without learning to admire and to esteem you; still, Sabretasche, you can well understand, that for poor Vy's sake——"

"Not see her again?" repeated Sabretasche, with something of his old sneering smile upon his worn, wearied, haggard features. "Are you human, Molyneux, that you say that coldly and calmly to a man who, to win your daughter, would brave death and shame, heaven and hell, yet who loved her better than himself, and would not do her wrong, even to purchase the sole paradise he craves, the sole chance of joy earth will ever again offer him."

"I know, I know," answered Jockey Jack, hastily. "You are a splendid fellow, Sabretasche. I honour you from my soul. I have told my wife so, I would tell any one so. At the same time, it is just *because*, God help you! you have such a passion for poor Vy, that I tell you—and I mean it, too, and I think you must see it yourself—that you had far better not meet each other any more, and, indeed, I cannot, as her father allow it——"

"No?" said Sabretasche, with a sternness and fierceness which Lord Molyneux had never imagined in his nature. "No? You side then, with those who think, because misfortune has overtaken a man, he must have no mercy shown him. Listen to me! You are taking dangerous measures. I tell you that, so well does Violet love me, that I have but to say to her, 'Take pity on me, and give yourself to me,' and I could make her leave you and her mother, her country and her friends, and follow me wherever I chose to lead her. If I exert my power over her, I believe that no authority of yours can or will keep her from me. It is not your word, nor society's dictum, that holds me back; it is solely and entirely because, young, pure-hearted, devoted as she is, I will not wrong her trust in me, by turning it to my own desires. I will not let my passions blind me

to what is right to her. I will not woo her in her youth to a path which, in maturer years, she might live to regret, and long to retrace. I will *not* do it. If I have not spared any other woman in my life, I will spare her. But, at the same time, I will not be parted from her utterly; I will not be compelled to forsake her in the hour of suffering I have brought upon her. As long as she loves me, I will not entirely surrender her to you or to any other man. You judge rightly; I *dare* not be with her long. God help me! I should have no strength. A field is open now to every soldier; if my Corps had not been ordered out, I should have exchanged, and gone on active service. My death would be the happiest thing for her; dead, I might be forgotten and—replaced; but for our farewell, eternal as it may be, I will choose my own hour. No man shall dictate or interfere between myself and Violet, who now *ought* to be—so near to one another!”

Sternly and passionately as he had spoken, his lips quivered, his voice sank to a hoarse whisper, and he turned his head away from the gaze of his fellow-man. The honest heart of blunt, simple, obtuse Jockey Jack, stirred for once into sympathy with the susceptible, sensitive, passionate nature beside him. He was silent for a moment, revolving in his mind the strange problem of this deep and tender love his daughter had awakened, musing over a character so unlike his own, so far above any with which he had come in contact. Then he stretched out his hand with a sudden impulse:

“Have your own way, you are right enough. I put more faith in your honour than in bars and bolts. If you love Violet thus, *I* can’t say you shall not see her; her heart’s nigh broken as it is. God help you both! I’ll trust you with her as I would myself!”

I think Sabretasche had pledged himself to more than he could have fulfilled. It would have been beyond the strength of man to have seen her brilliant and laughing eyes heavy with tears wrung from her heart's depths, her head, with its wealth of chesnut hair, bowed and bent with the weight of an anguish too great to bear; to have heard the low moan with which she would lie for hours on the cushions of her boudoir, like a summer rose snapped off in the fury of a tempest—to have been tortured with the touch of her hands clinging to him, with her wild entreaties to him not to leave her, with her words in calmer moments promising eternal fidelity to him, and vowing to keep true to him, true as though she were his wife—it had been more than the strength of man to have endured all this, and kept his word so constantly in sight as never to whisper to her of possible joy, never to woo her to a forbidden future.

He *did* keep it, with iron nerve and giant self-subjection, wonderful indeed in one, born in the voluptuous South, and accustomed to an existence, if of most refined, still of most complete, self-indulgence. He did keep it, though his heart would have broken—if hearts did break—in the agony crowded into those few brief days. Had his torture lasted longer, I doubt if he would have borne up against it; for, strong as his honour was, his love was stronger still. But the English and French troops were gathering in the East; months before, the Guards had tramped through London streets in the grey of the morning, with their band playing their old cheery tunes, and their Queen wishing them God speed. For several months in Woolwich Dockyards transports had been filling and ships weighing anchor, and decks crowding with line on line of troops. Already through

England, after a forty years' peace, the military spirit of the nation had awoke; the trumpet-call rang through the country, sounding far away through the length and breadth of the land, arousing the slumbering embers of war that had slept since Waterloo; already bitter partings were taking place in stately English homes, and by lowly farmstead hearths; and young gallant blood warmed for the strife, longing for the struggle to come, and knowing nothing of the deadly work of privation and disease, waiting, and chafing, and dying off under inaction, that was to be their doom. Ours were ordered to the Crimea with but a fortnight's time for preparation; where sharp work was to be done the Dashers were pretty sure to be in request. We were glad enough to catch a glimpse of active service and real life, after long years of dawdling in London drawing-rooms, and boring ourselves with the routine of pleasures of which we had long tired. We had plenty to do in the few days' notice; fresh harness, fresh horses, new rifles, and old liaisons; cases of Bass and Cognac; partings with fair women; buying in camp furniture; burning the souvenirs of half a dozen seasons; the young ones thinking of Moore and Byron, the Bosphorus and veiled Haidées—we of Turkish tobacco, Syrian stallions, Miniés, and Long Enfields. We had all plenty to do, and the Crimea came to us as a good bit of fun, to take the place that year of the Western Highlands, the English open, or yachting up to Norway, or through the Levant.

"Colonel Brandling wishes to speak to you, Major," said his man to De Vigne, one morning when Granville was dressing, after exercising his troop up at Wormwood Scrubs.

"Colonel Brandling? Ask him if he'd mind coming up to me here, if he's in a hurry," answered De Vigne,

He did not bear Curly the greatest good will since seeing him under the chesnut-trees at St. Crucis—where, by the way, he himself had not been since.

"May I come in, old fellow?" asked Curly's voice at the door.

"Certainly. You are an early visitor, Curly," said De Vigne, rather curtly. "I thought you'd prefer coming up here instead of waiting ten minutes while I washed my hands and put myself en bourgeois."

"Yes, I have come early," began Curly, so abstractedly that De Vigne swung round, and noticed with astonishment that his light-hearted Frestonhills pet seemed strangely down in the mouth. Curly was distrait and absent; he looked worried, and there were dark circles beneath his eyes as of a man who has passed the night tossing on his bed to painful thoughts.

"What's the matter, Curly?" asked De Vigne. "Has Heliotrope gone lame, Lord Ormolu turned crusty, Eudoxie Lemaire deserted you, or what is it?"

Curly smiled, but very sadly.

"Nothing new; I have made a fool of myself, that's all."

"And are come to me for auricular confession? What is the matter, Curly?"

"Imprimis, I have asked a woman to be my wife," answered Curly, with a nervous laugh, playing with the bouquet bottles on the table.

De Vigne started perceptibly; he looked up with a rapid glance of interrogation, but he did not speak, except a rather haughty and impatient "Indeed!"

Curly did not notice his manner, he was too ill at ease, too thoroughly absorbed in his own thoughts, too entirely at a loss, for the first time in his life, how to express what he wanted to say. Curly had often come

to De Vigne with the embarrassments and difficulties of his life; when he had dropped more over the Oaks than he knew exactly how to pay, or entangled himself where a tigress grip held him tighter than he relished; but there are other things that a man cannot so readily say to another.

"Well!" said De Vigne, impatient at his silence, and more anxious, perhaps, than he would have allowed to hear the end of these confessions. "Certainly the step shows no great wisdom. Who has bewitched you into it?"

"You can guess, I should say."

"Not I; I am no *Œdipus*; and of all riddles, men's folly with women is the hardest to read."

"Yet you might. Who can be with her and resist her——"

"Her?—who? Speak intelligibly, Curly," said De Vigne, irritably. "Remember your lover's raptures are Arabic to me."

"In a word then," said Curly, hurriedly, "I love Alma Tressillian, and I have told her so."

De Vigne's eyebrows contracted, his lips turned pale, and he set them into a hard straight line, as I have seen him when suffering severe physical pain.

"She has accepted you, of course?"

Had Curly been less preoccupied, he must have thought how huskily and coldly the question was spoken.

Curly shook his head.

"No?" exclaimed De Vigne, his eyes lighting up from their haughty impassibility into passionate eagerness.

"No! Plenty of women have loved me, too; yet when I am more in earnest than I ever was, I can awaken no

response. I love her very dearly, Heaven knows. I would give her my name, my rank, my riches, were they a thousand times greater than they are. Good Heavens! it seems very bitter that love like mine should count for nothing, when other men, only seeking to gratify their passions or gain their own selfish ends, win all before them."

His voice trembled as he spoke! his gay and careless spirits were beaten down; for the first time in his bright butterfly life Sorrow had come upon him. Its touch is death, and its breath the chill air of the charnel-house, even when we have had it by us waking and sleeping, in our bed and at our board, peopling our solitude and poisoning our Falernian, rising with the morning sun and with the evening stars;—how much heavier then must be the iron hand, how much more chill its breath, ice cold as the air of a grave, to one who has never known its presence!

Wer nie sein Brod mit Thränen ass,
Wer nie die kummervollen Nächte
Auf seinem Bette weinend sass,
Der kennt euch nicht, ihr himmlischen Mächte.

Curly's voice trembled; he leaned his arm on the dressing-table, and his head upon his hand; his rejection had cut him more keenly to the heart than he cared another man should see. De Vigne stood still, an eager gladness in his eyes, a faint flush of colour on his face, his heart beating freely and his pulses throbbing quickly; that vehement and exultant joy of which his nature was capable, stirred in him at the thought of Curly's rejection. We never know how we value a thing till its loss is threatened!

He did not answer for some moments; then he laid his hand on Curly's shoulder with that old gentleness he had always used to his old Frestonhills favourite.

"Dear old fellow, it *is* hard. I am very——"

He stopped abruptly, he would have added, "sorry for you," but De Vigne knew that he was *not* sorry in his heart, and the innate truth that was in the man checked the lie that conventionality would have pardoned.

Curly threw off his hand and started to his feet. Something in De Vigne's tone struck on his lover's keen senses with a suspicion that before had never crossed him, absorbed as he had been in his own love for the Little Tressillian, and his own hopes and fears for his favour in her eyes.

"Spare yourself the falsehood," he said, coldly, as *he* had never spoken before to his idolized "senior pupil." "Commiseration from a rival is simply insult."

"A rival?" repeated De Vigne, that fiery blood of his always ready—too ready, at times—to rise up in anger.

"Yes, and a successful one, perhaps," said Curly, as hotly, for at the sting of jealousy the sweetest temper can turn into hate. "You could not say on your honour, De Vigne, that my rejection by her gives you pain. If you did your face would belie you! You love her as well as I; you are jealous over her; perhaps you have already taken advantage of her youth and her ignorance of the world and her trust in you, to sacrifice her to your own inconstant passions——"

"Silence!" said De Vigne, fiercely. "Your very supposition is an insult to my honour."

"Do you care nothing for her, then?"

The dark blood of his race rose over De Vigne's forehead; his eyes lighted; he looked like a lion longing to spring upon his foe. *He* to have his heart probed rudely like this—to endure to have his dearest secrets

dragged to daylight—he to be questioned, counselled, arraigned in accusation by another man! Curly had forgotten his character, or he would have hardly thought to gain his secret by provocation and condemnation. De Vigne restrained his anger only by a mighty effort of will, and he threw back his hand with that gesture, habitually expressive with him of contemptuous irritation.

“If you came here to cross-question me, you were singularly unwise. I am not very likely to be patient under such treatment. Whatever my feelings might be on any subject of the kind, do you suppose it is probable I should confide them to you?”

So haughtily careless was his tone, that Curly, catching at straws as men in love will do, began to hope that De Vigne, cold and cynical as he had been to women ever since his fatal marriage, might, after all, be indifferent to his protégée.

“If it be an insult to your honour, then,” he said, eagerly, “to hint that you love her, or think of her otherwise than as a sister, you can have no objection to do for me what I came to ask of you.”

“What is that?” asked De Vigne, coldly. He could not forgive Curly any of his words; if he resented the accusation of loving Alma, because it startled him into consciousness of what he had been unwilling to admit to himself, he resented still more the supposition that he cared for Alma as a sister, since it involved the deduction that she might love him—as a brother! And that fraternal calmness of affection ill chimed in with an impetuous nature that knew few shades between hate and love, between profound indifference or entire possession!

“Alma rejected me!” answered poor Curly; all the unconscious dignity of sorrow was lent to his still girlish

and Greek-like beauty, and a sadness strangely calm and deep for his gay insouciant character had settled in his blue eyes. "I offered her what few men would have thought it necessary to offer her, unprotected as she is. Yet she rejected me, though gently and tenderly, for she has nothing harsh in her. But sometimes we know a woman's refusal is not positive. I thought that perhaps (you have great influence over her) you could put this before her; persuade her at the least not to deny me all hope; plead my cause with her; ask her to let me wait? If it were even as long as Jacob for Rachel, I would bear it. I would try to be more worthy of her, to make her fonder of me. I would shake off the idleness and uselessness of my present life. I would gain a name that would do her honour. I would do anything, everything, if *only* she would give me hope!"

He spoke fervently and earnestly; pale as death with the love that brought no joy! his delicate girlish face stamped pitifully with the anguish of uncontrollable anxiety, yet with a new nobility upon it from the chivalric honour and high devotedness which Alma had awakened in him.

He was silent—and De Vigne as well. De Vigne leaned against one of the windows of his bedroom, his face turned away from Curly, and his eyes fixed on the gay street below. Curly's words stirred him strangely; they revealed his own heart to him; they contrasted with such love as he had always known; they stung him with the thought, how much better sheltered from the storms of passion and the chill blasts of the world in Curly's bosom than in his own, would be this fragile and soft-winged little dove, now coveted by both.

Curly repeated his question in low tones.

"De Vigne, will you do it? Will you plead my cause

with her? If she be so little to you it will cost you nothing!"

Again he did not answer, the question struck too closely home. It woke up in all its force the passion which had before slumbered in some unconsciousness. When asked to give her to another, he learned how dear she was to him himself. Hot and jealous by nature as a Southern, how could *he* plead with her to give the joys to his rival of which a cruel fate had robbed him? how could *he* give the woman he would win for himself, away to the arms of another?

"Answer me, De Vigne. Yes or no?"

"No!"

And haughtily calm as the response was, in his heart went up a bitter cry, "God help me. I *cannot*!"

"Then you love her, and have lied!"

De Vigne sprang forward like a tiger at the hiss of the murderous and cowardly bullet that has roused him from his lair; the fire of just anger now burned in his dark eyes, and his teeth were set like a man who holds his vengeance with difficulty in check. Involuntarily he lifted his right arm; another man he would have struck down at his feet for that dastard word. But with an effort—how great only those who knew his nature could appreciate—he held his anger in, as he would have held a chafing and fiery horse with iron hand upon its reins.

"Your love has maddened you, or you would scarcely have dared to use that word to me. If I did not pity you, and if I had not liked you since you were a little fair-faced boy, I should make you answer for that insult in other ways than speech. If I *were* to love any woman, what right have you to dictate to me my actions or dispute my will? You might know of old that I suffer no man's interference with me and mine."

"I have no power to dispute your will," interrupted Curly, "nor to arrest your actions. Would to Heaven I had! But as a man who loves her truly and honourably himself, I will tell you, whether I have a right or no, that no prevarication on your part hides from me that you at least share my madness. I will tell you, too, though you slew me to-morrow for it, that she is too pure to be made the plaything of your fickle passions, and cast off when you are weary of her face and seek a newer mistress. I will tell you that the man who wrongs her trust in him, and betrays her guileless frankness, will carry a sin in his bosom greater than Cain's fratricide. I will tell you that, if you go on as you have done from day to day concealing your marriage, yet knitting her heart to yours—if you do not at once reveal your history to her, and leave her free to act for herself, to love you or to leave you, to save herself from you or to sacrifice herself for you, as she please, that for all your unstained name and unsuspected honour, *I* shall call you a coward!"

"My God!" muttered De Vigne, "that I should live to hear another man speak such words to me. I wonder I do not kill you where you stand!"

I wonder, too, he kept down his wrath even to the point he did, for De Vigne's nature had no trace of the lamb in it, and to attack his honour was a worse crime than to attack his life. Deadly passion was between those two men then, sweeping away all ancient memories of boyish days, all gentler touches of brighter hours and kinder communion. Their eyes met—fierce, steady, full of fire, and love, and hate; De Vigne's hand clenched harder on his breast, and with the other he signed him to the door. The wildest passions were at war within him; his instinct thirsted to revenge the first insult he

had ever known, yet his kingly soul at the daring that defied him yielded something like that knightly admiration with which the Thirty looked upon the Thirty when the sun went down on Carnac.

"Go—go! I honour you for your defence of her, but such words as have passed between us, no blood can wash out, nor after words efface!"

Curly bent his head and left him; he had done all he could. When they met again——! Ah! God knows if our meetings were foreseen, many voices would be softer, many farewells warmer, many lips that smile would quiver, many eyes that laugh would linger long with salt tears in them, many hands would never quit their clasp that touch another with light careless grasp, at partings where no prescience warns, no second-sight can guide!

Curly left him, and De Vigne threw himself into an arm-chair, all the fiery thoughts roused in him beating like the strong pinions of chained eagles. The passions which had already cost him so much, and which from his fatal marriage-day he had vowed should never regain their Circean hold upon him, were now let loose, and rioted in his heart. He knew that he loved, as he had sworn to himself never to love woman; that the honour and the pride on which he had piqued himself had been futile to save him from the danger which he had so scornfully derided and recklessly provoked; that his own iron-will, on which he had so fearlessly relied, had been powerless to hold him back from the old intoxication, whose fiery draught had poisoned him even in its sweetness, and to whose delirium he had vowed never again to succumb.

He loved her, and De Vigne was not a man cold enough, or, as the world would phrase it, virtuous enough,

to say to the woman he idolised, "Flee from me—society will not smile upon our love." Yet Curly's words had struck into his brain with marks of fire. "Going on as you have done day by day, deceiving her by concealment of your marriage, yet knitting her heart to yours!" These stung him cruelly, for, of all sins, De Vigne abhorred concealment or cowardice; of all men, he was most punctilious in his ideas of truth and honour, and his conscience told him that had he acted straightforwardly, or, for her, wisely, he would have let Alma know in the earliest days of their intimacy of the cruel ties of Church and Law which fettered him with so uncongenial and so unmerited a chain. True, he had never concealed it from bad motives; it was solely his disgust at every thought of the Trefusis, and the semi-oblivion into which—never seeing his wife to remind him of it—the bare fact of his so-called marriage had sunk, which had prevented his revealing it. He had never thought the matter would be of consequence to her; he had looked on her as a mere acquaintance, and it had no more occurred to him to tell her his history, than it had done to talk it over in the clubs. The imputation of want of candour, of lacking to a young girl the honour he had been ever so scrupulous in yielding to men, stung him, however, to the quick. Other words, too, lingered on his mind, bringing with them keen, sharp pain. The doubt whether his love was returned was to him like the bitterness of death. It *should* not have been, we know, had he been unselfish as he ought; he *should* have prayed for punishment to fall upon his head, and for her to be spared the fruits of his own imprudence; but what man amongst us can put his hand upon his heart, and say before God that he could have summoned up such unselfishness under such a temptation? Not I—not

you—not Granville de Vigné, for, as Sabretasche would have said, we are unhappily mortal, *mon ami*!

One resolution he made amidst the whirl of thoughts and feelings which the stormy scene with Curly had so unexpectedly called into life—that was to tell her of his marriage at once. Perhaps there mingled with it some thought that by Alma's reception of it he would see how little or how much she cared for him. I know not; if there were I dare throw no stone at him. How many of my motives—how many of yours—of any man's, are unmixed and undefiled? He resolved to tell her, to be cold and guarded with her, to let her see no sign or shadow of the passion she had awakened. All his past warnings had failed to teach him wisdom; he still trusted in his own strength, still believed his will powerful enough to hold his love down without word or token of it, while it gnawed at his heart-strings in the very presence of the woman who had awakened it! Once more De Vigne had gone down before his old foe and syren, Passion; like Sisera before the treacherous wife of Heber the Kenite, at her feet he bowed and fell.

CHAPTER IV.

The Ordeal by Fire.

THERE was the beauty of the “summer time” in the fragrant air, and on the moistened roads, and on the rich green woodlands, but it never reached his eyes or heart as De Vigne rode to Richmond, spurring his horse into a mad gallop, with that one world within him which blinds a man to all the rest of earth. He galloped on and on, never slackening his pace; for the first time in all his soldier's life he felt *dread*—dread of telling the woman he loved, that he was tied to the woman he

hated! His pulse throbbed and his heart beat loudly as he came in sight of the farmhouse of St. Crucis, and saw coming out of the little gate, and taking his horse's bridle off the post—Vane Castleton.

"Good Heavens!" thought De Vigne, with a deadly anguish tightening at his heart, "is she, then, like the rest? Has she duped us all? Is her guileless frankness as great a lie as other women's artifice?"

Castleton did not see him; he threw himself across his bay, and rode down the opposite road. De Vigne wavered a moment; sceptical as he was, he was almost ready to turn his horse's head and leave her, never to see her again. If she chose Castleton, let him have her! But love conquered; the girl's face had grown too dear to him for him of his own act never to look upon it again. He flung his bridle over the gate, pushed the little wicket open, and entered the garden. In the window, with her eyes lifted upwards to a lark singing far above in the blue ether, the chesnut-boughs hanging over her in their dark green framework, the honeysuckles and china roses bending down till they touched her shining golden hair; her cheeks a little flushed, was Alma. At the sight of her he trembled like a woman with the passion that had grown silently up and ripened into such sudden force. How *could* he give her up to any living man? Right or wrong, how could he so tame down his inborn nature as to wish to win from such a woman only the calm, chill affection of a sister?

That mad jealousy which had awoke in all its fire at the sight of Castleton, and the suspicion that it was for Castleton's sake and not for his own that she had rejected Curly's suit, drove all memory of the Trefusis, all recollection of what he came to avow to Alma, from his mind!

He stood and looked at her—the rush of that delirium, half rapture and half suffering, which, for long years, none of her sex had had the power to rouse in him, told him that he should not dare to trust himself in her presence, for no will, however strong, could have strength enough to tame its fever down and chill his veins into ice-water. Still he lingered, not master of himself. The man's nature, alive and vigorous, rebelled against the stoicism he had thought to graft upon it, and flung off the cold and alien bonds of the chill philosophy circumstances had taught him to adopt. His heart was made for passionate joys; and against reason it demanded its rights and clamoured for his freedom. He lingered there loth—who can marvel?—to close upon himself the golden gates of a fuller, sweeter, more glorious existence; and turn away to bear an unmerited curse alone—a wanderer from that Eden which was his right and heritage as a man. He lingered—then she looked up and saw him, her lips parted with a low, glad cry, the rose flush deepened in her cheeks, the first blush she had ever given for him. She sprang down from the window, which was scarcely a foot above the ground, ran across the lawn as lightly as a fawn, and stood by his side.

“Oh, Sir Folko! how long you have been away!”

How could he leave her then?

She came and stood by him; her golden hair nearly touching his arm, her fingers still on his hand, her glad beaming face turned up to his with the full glow of the afternoon sunshine upon it. She stood by him, only thinking of her happiness at seeing him, never dreaming of the torture her presence was to him—a torment yet an ecstasy, like the exultation and the awakening of an opium-smoker combined in one. Seeing her thus, with

her hand in his, her eyes looking upwards to him, so near to her that he could count every breath that parted her soft warm lips, it was hard for him to keep stern and cold to her, repress the words that hung upon his lips, chain down the impulse that rose in him with irresistible longing to take her to his heart, and carry her far away where no man could touch her, and no false laws deny him the love that was his common birth-right among men.

"What a long time you have been away!" began Alma again. "Ten whole days! Have you been out of town?"

"Oh no!" said De Vigne, moving towards the house without looking at her.

"Then why have you been so long?"

"I have been engaged, and you have had plenty of other visitors," he answered, his jealousy of Vane Castleton working up into a bitterness he could not wholly conceal.

She coloured. Looking aside at her, he saw the flush in her cheeks. She had never looked confused before at any words of his, and he put it down, not to his own abruptness, but to the memory of his rival.

"No visitors whom I care for," said Alma, with that pretty petulance which became her so well. "I have told you till I am tired of telling you that nobody makes up, or ever could make up, to me for your absence!"

"Still, when I am absent," he said, with that satire which with him was often a veil to very deep feeling, "you can console yourself very agreeably with other men!"

They had now passed into her room. He leaned against the side of the window, playing impatiently with sprays of the honeysuckle and clematis that hung round

it, snapping the sprays and throwing the fragrant flowers recklessly on the grass outside the sill, careless of the ruin of beauty he was causing. She stood opposite to him, stroking the parrot's scarlet crest unconsciously—she and her bird making a brilliant picture.

"If I thought so," she answered quickly, "I should not honour the woman I suspected by any visits at all, were I you."

"Is that a hint to me to leave your new friend Castleton the monopoly?" asked De Vigne, between his teeth.

"Sir Folko!"

That was all she deigned to answer—her eyes flashing fire in their dark-blue depths, her cheeks hot as the crimson roses above her head, her expressive lips full of tremulous indignation, her attitude, all fire and grace and outraged pride, said the rest.

"Would you try to make me believe, then, that you do not know that Castleton loves you?" asked De Vigne, fiercely.

Alma's cheeks glowed to a warmer crimson still, and resentment at his tone flashed from under her black lashes, like azure lightning. He had put *her* passions up now.

"You must be mad to speak to me in that tone! I bear no imputation of a falsehood even from you. I do not suppose Lord Vane loves me, as you phrase it! That he flatters me, and would talk more foolish nonsense still, I know."

"You will be very unwise if you give ear or weight to his 'foolish nonsense;' many a girl, as young and as fair as you, have been ruined by listening to it," interrupted De Vigne. He was so mad that Vane Castleton should even have dreamt that he would win her; he was so rife with passions wild and reckless, that rather than

stand calmly by the girl, he must upbraid her; and the storm that was in his heart found vent in cruel and sarcastic words, being denied the softer and natural outlet of love vows and fond caresses. The love that murdered Desdemona, and condemned Heloise to a living death, is not dead in the world yet. "Castleton *can* love, not as you idealise it, perhaps, but as he holds it. There is no man so brutal, so heartless, or so egotistical, but can love—as he translates the word, at least—for his own private ends or selfish gratification. 'Love' is men's amusement, like horse-racing, or gaming, or drinking, and you would not find that 'bad men' abstain from it—rather the contrary, I am afraid! Castleton will love you, I dare say, if you let him, very dearly—for a month or two!"

Alma gazed at him, her large eyes wide open, like a startled gazelle's, her cheeks crimson with the blush his manner and his subject awoke.

"Sir Folko, what has come to you? *Are you mad?*"

"Perhaps," said De Vigne, between his teeth. "All I say is, that you are unwise to receive Castleton's visits and listen to his flattering compliments. Many women have rued them."

"Sir Folko! What right have you to speak to me like this?" interrupted Alma, with a passionate gesture. "What right have you to suppose that I should stoop to Vane Castleton, or any other man? If you had listened to me you would have heard that his fulsome compliments are detestable to me, that I hate them and loathe them, that I told him so this very afternoon, and that I shall have strangely mistaken him if ever he repeats his visits here again. Would you wish to give me over to your friend? Would you think so meanly of me as to—Oh, Heaven forgive you!"

She stood beside him passionate as a little Pythoness, with all the fervour of her moiety of Italian nature awoke and aroused; her cheeks crimson with her indignation, her grief, and her vehemence, her lips just parted with their rush of words, her head thrown back in defiance, her hands clenched together, and in her large brilliant eyes inexpressible tenderness, reproach, and wistful agony. Her gaze was fixed upon him even while her heart heaved with the new emotions his words had aroused; and tears rose in her throat and gathered in her eyes—those tears of blood, the tears of woman's love. All his passions surged up in De Vigne's heart with resistless force; that love which had crept into his heart with such insidious stealth, and burst into such sudden flame but a few hours before, mastered and conquered him. In her strange and brilliant fascination, in her fond and childlike frankness, in her newly-dawned and impassioned tenderness she stood before him. Will, power, reason, self-control were shivered to the winds, he was no statue of clay, no sculptured god of stone to resist such fierce temptation—to pass over and reject all for which nature and manhood, and tenderness pleaded—to put away with unshaken hand the love for which every fibre of his being yearned!

She stood before him in all her witchery of dawning womanhood, and before her De Vigne's strength bowed down and fell; the love within him wrestled with and overthrew him; every nerve of his frame thrilled and throbbed, every vein seemed turned to fire; he seized her in his arms where she stood, he crushed her slight form against his heart in an embrace long and close enough for a farewell, while he covered her flushed cheeks and soft warm lips with "lava kisses melting while they burned." He needed no words to tell him he was

loved; between them now there was an eloquence compared to which all speech is dumb.

Those moments of deep rapture passed uncounted by De Vigne, conscious only of that ecstasy of which he had been robbed so long, which was to his heart as the flowing of water-springs through a dry land; all the outer world was forgotten by him, all his unnatural and cruel ties faded from his memory; all he remembered was—that he loved and was loved! Holding her still in his arms he leaned against the side of the window, the soft summer wind fanning their brows, flushed with their mutual joy; his passion spending itself in broken sighs and deep delight, and hurried words and fond caresses.

“You love me, Alma?” he whispered eagerly.

“How could I choose but love you?”

“My God! Would to Heaven I could reward you for it!”

Alma, who knew not his meaning, looked up with a smile, half shy, half mournful, yet inexpressibly beautiful, with its frank gladness and deep tenderness.

“Ah, what reward is there like your love?”

De Vigne kissed her lips to silence; he dare not listen to the eloquence that lured him in its unconscious innocence with such fierce temptation. For, now that the first moments of wild rapture had passed, came the memory of his marriage, of his resolves, of his duty, shown him by a much younger, and in such matters equally latitudinarian a man, and acknowledged to himself by reason and honour, justice and generosity; of his right to tell her fully and freely of the fetters that held him, and the woman whom Law decreed to be, though heart and nature refused ever to acknowledge as, his wife. All these rushed on him, and stood between him and his new-won heaven, as we have seen the dark and

spectral Shadow of the Hartz Mountains rise up cold, and grim, between us and the sweet rose-hued dawn which is breaking over the hills and valleys, and chasing away with its golden glories, the poisonous shades and shapes of night.

He had no power to end with his own hand this fresh and glorious existence which had opened before him. If he had ended with absinthe or with laudanum his own life, men would have prosed sermons over him, and printed his condemnation in glaring letters; yet, alas! for charity or judgment, they would have condemned him equally because he shrank from this far worse and more cruel self-murder—the assassination of joy, the suicide of the soul. By Heaven, men need be gods to conform to all the laws of men! We must love life so well, that when it is at its darkest, its loneliest, brimful with misery, bitter and poisonous as hemlock, we must never, in our hardest hours of solitude, feel for an instant tempted to flee from its fret and anguish to the silent sleep of the tomb. Yet—we must love it so little, that when it smiles the sweetest, when it is fair as the dawn and generous as the sunshine, when it has led us from the dark and pestilent gloom of a charnel-house back to a laughing and joyous earth, when it has turned our tears into smiles, our sorrow into joy, our solitude into a heaven of delight, *then* with an unhesitating hand we are to put aside the glorious cup of life, and turn away, without one backward glance, from our loved Eden into the land of darkness, of silence, and of tears. Alas! if God be as harsh to us as man is to his fellow-man!

“How well do you love me, Alma?” he said, abruptly, as they sat beside the open bay-window, his arms round her, her head leaning against his breast, and on her face the flush of joy too deep to last.

"How well do I love you?" she repeated, with her old, arch, amused smile playing round her lips. "Tell me, first, how many petals there are in those roses, how many leaves on the chesnut-boughs, how many feathers in that butterfly's wings—then perhaps I may tell you how well I love you, Sir Folko!"

De Vigne could not but smile at the poetry and enthusiasm of the reply—so like Alma herself; but as he smiled he sighed impatiently.

"I am 'Sir Folko' no longer, Alma; the name was never appropriate. I have always told you I am no stainless knight. Call me Granville. I have no one to give me the old familiar name now."

"Granville!" murmured Alma, repeating the name to herself, with a deeper flush on her cheeks. "Granville! Yes it is a beautiful name, and I love it because it is yours; yet I love Sir Folko best, because others have called you Granville before me, but 'Sir Folko' is all my own!"

Her innocent speech stung him to the heart; he remembered how truth, and honour, and justice demanded of him to tell her *who* had "called him Granville before her."

He interrupted her hastily:

"But you have not answered my question. How much do you love me? Come, tell me!"

"How *can* I tell you?" she answered, looking up in his face with a smile so tender that it was almost mournful. "It seems to me that no one could ever have loved as I do you. How much do I love you? Oh! I will tell you when you number the rose-leaves or count the river waves, then, but not till then, could I ever gauge my love for you!"

He pressed her closer to him, yet he asked a cruel question:

"But if I left you now—if I were ordered on foreign service, for instance, and died in battle, could you not find fresh happiness without me?"

She clung to him, all her radiant joy banished, her face white and her eyes wild with a prescient dread:

"Oh! why do you torture me so? such jests are cruel! I do not tell you I would die for you, that is a hackneyed phrase not fit for deep and earnest love like ours, though, Heaven knows, existence would be no sacrifice if given up to serve you; but I would live for you—I *will* live for you as no woman ever lived for man. I will increase all talents God has given me that you may be prouder of me; I will try and root out all my faults, that you may love me better. If ever you lose your wealth, as rich men have done, I will work for you, and glory in my task. To share the pomp of others would be misery, to share your poverty, joy. I will pray to Heaven that I may always be beautiful in your eyes; but if you ever love another, do not tell me, but kill me, as Alarcos slew his wife: to lose my life would be sweeter than to lose your love. If war calls you, I will follow—death and danger would have no terror by your side—and if you died in battle, I would be truer to you, till we met beyond the grave, than woman ever was to any living love. But—my God! you *know* how well I love you; why do you torture me thus!"

She had spoken with all that impassioned fervour natural to her, but passion so intense treads close on anguish; all the soft bloom of youth and joy forsook her lips, and her head drooped upon her bosom, which heaved with uncontrollable sobs. Poor child! they were the first of those waters of Marah which flow side by side with

the hot springs of Passion. De Vigne pressed her to his heart, lifted her face to his, and called back life to her cheeks with breathless caresses, as if he would repay with that mute eloquence the love which touched him too deeply for her to answer it in words. It struck far down into his heart, this generous and high-souled tenderness. All its devotion and heroism; all its unselfishness, and warmth, and trust; all the diviner essence which breathed in it, marking it out from man's and woman's ordinary loves, brutal on the one side, exigent and egotistical on the other; struck home to his better nature and there came upon him a mortal anguish of regret and shame that here he should give nothing, but gain all. In those few hours she had grown unutterably dear to him, though, save a few murmured and feverish words, his passions were too strong to form themselves to speech. But one other question he put to her:

"Darling, if you love me like this, would you be content with me for your sole companion, away from the pleasures of society, alone in a solitude of the heart? For me, with me, could you bear the world's sneer? With the warmth of love around you, would you care what the world said of you? Should I be sufficient for you, if others look coldly and neglected you?"

Even now his literal meaning did not occur to her; she neither knew nor dreamt of any ties that bound him; and she still thought he was trying to see how little or how much she loved him.

"Why do you ask me?" she said, almost impatiently, her eyes growing dark and humid with her great love for him. "You know well enough that 'for you,' and 'with you,' are talismans all-powerful with me. Your smile is my sole joy, your coldness my sole sorrow. You are all the world to me; why *will* you doubt me?"

"I do *not* doubt you! It would be better for you if your love were less true, or mine more worthy it. Would to God we had met earlier!"

But she did not hear his muttered words, nor see the hot tears that stood in his eyes; tears wrung from his very heart's depths; tears of gratitude, regret, remorse, and wholly of tenderness, as he bent over her, pressing his burning lips to her flushed brow and soft cheeks, warm with a feverish glow, the glow of joy, predestined not to last.

And now the sun was near his setting, and all the earth was brilliant with the imperial glories that attend the gorgeous burial of a summer-day. Mingling rays of crimson and of gold stretched across the sky, steeping in light the snow-white fleecy clouds that rose up on the horizon, like the silvery mountain range of some far-off and Arcadian land. The roses glowed a deeper hue, the chesnut-boughs drooped nearer to the earth; the flowers hung their heads, drunk with the evening dew; the birds were rocked by the warm west wind; delicious odour from the lime-leaves filled the air, while already on the warm and radiant day descended the tender and voluptuous night.

The Sunset hour, when the busy day still lingers on the earth, bowed down with the weight of sins and sorrows with which in one brief twelve hours the sons of men have laden her; and the night sweeps down with noiseless wing from heaven, to lay her soft hand on weary human eyes, and lead them into dream-land, to rest awhile from toil and care; is ever full of Nature's deepest poetry. The working man at sunset, leaves his plough and his hard toil for daily bread, and catches one glimpse of God's great mystery of beauty, as he sees the evening dew glisten in the dying buds of the

flowers his plough has slain. The Ave Maria at sunset, wings its solemn chant over the woods and mountains, golden in God's own light, and mingles its human worship with the pure voiceless prayer of the fair earth. The soul of man at sunset, shakes off the dust of the working world, and with its rest has time to listen to the sweeter under-notes and more spiritual harmonies which lie under the rushing current of our outer life; and at sunset our hearts grow tenderer to those we hate, and more awake to all the silent beauty of existence which our strife, and fret, and follies mar and ruin; and—when we love—as the warm sunset fades, and the dreamy night draws on, all the poetry and passion that lie in us wake from their slumber, and our heart throbs with its subtle and voluptuous beauty.

The golden rays of the sun, while it still lingered over the earth, as a lover loth to part, fell upon Alma's hair, and lit up her features with a strange radiance, touching the lips and cheeks into a richer glow, and darkening her eyes into a still deeper brilliance. They were silent; they needed no words between them, a whisper now and then was all; their thoughts were better uttered by the caresses he lavished upon her, in the vehemence of his new-born love. The dangerous spell of the hour stole upon them; her soft arms were round his neck; his lips rested on her flushed brow; while one hand played with a thick silky lock of her golden hair which had escaped from the rest and hung down to her waist, twisting it round his fingers and drawing it out, half in admiration of its beauty, half in absence of thought. And as the sun sank out of sight below the horizon, and the little crescent of the moon rose clearer in the evening mists, and the air grew sweeter with the perfume of the early night, Alma might have known

that the heart on which her young head rested, was throbbing loudly with fiercer and more restless passion than the loving and tender joy which made *her* heart its own unclouded heaven.

And still he had not told her of his marriage; and still he said to himself, "I ought to leave her, but, God forgive me! *I cannot.*"

On their delicious solitude the sound of a horse's hoofs broke suddenly, with the harsh clang and clamour of the outer world. All was so still around Alma's sequestered home, especially in the summer evenings, when the animal life about the farm was at rest, that the unusual sound brought, by its sudden inroad, the serpent of social life into the solitude of the heart, from which for a while all memory of the prying and fretting world had been excluded.

The horse's gallop ceased at the little gate, and the wicket was opened with a clash of its iron latch. De Vigne started, with a vague dread that some one had come to try and rob him of his new-won treasure. The strongest nerves grow highly strung at times; and when the poetry of life wakes in the hearts of men of action, and passion rises up out of their ordinarily calm existence, their whole souls stir with it, as the great seas, that do not move for light showers or low winds, arise at the sound of the tempest, till all nature is awed at their vehemence, and their own lowest depths tremble with the convulsion.

"What is the matter?" whispered Alma, as she saw his eyes straining eagerly to see who the new comer was.

"Nothing, nothing," he answered hastily. He could not tell her that the vague dread upon him (upon him! he who had laughed at every danger, and held his own against every foe) was the terror and the horror of that

woman whom the Law called his Wife. He gave a deep sigh of relief as he saw that it was only his own groom, Warren, coming up the path with a note in his hand; but the blood mounted to his forehead in anger at the interruption. With the contradictory waywardness of human nature, while he knew that he should never leave Alma, unless some imperative call aided him to drag himself from her side, he could have found it in his heart to slay the man who would force him, however innocently, from his paradise!

The note was merely from Dunbar, major of Ours, to ask to see him at once, on business of urgent military importance; but as the envelope was marked outside "Immediate," his confidential servant had sent a groom off with it as soon as he had seen it.

De Vigne read the note in silence, only pointing to Alma the words on it, "Let me see you, if possible, early this evening," and sat still, tearing the paper into little pieces, with his teeth set, his face deadly pale, and a bitter struggle in his heart—a struggle more hard and cruel, even than to most men, to one who had followed all his impulses, whose will had been unbridled from his cradle, with whom to wish and to have had always been synonymous, and whose passions were as strong as renunciation was unaccustomed. With a fierce oath muttered in his teeth he sprang to his feet; half awed by the sternness on his face, the grey pallor of his cheek, and the flashing fire of his eyes, she took his hands in her own with the caressing fondness of her usual manner.

"Must you go? Can't you give me one half hour more? The hours were always so long when you were away; what will they be now? Give me ten minutes more—just ten minutes!"

Her loving, innocent words, the clinging touch of her hands, the witchery of her face, lifted up to his in the twilight shadows—what tortures they were to him!

"Hush, hush!" he said, fiercely, crushing her in a passionate farewell embrace. "Do not ask me; for God's sake, let me go while I can! Kiss me and forgive me, my worshipped darling, for all the sins in my past, and my acts and my thoughts, of which your guileless heart never dreams!"

She did not understand him; she had no clue to the wild desires rioting in his heart; but love taught her the sympathy, experience alone could not have given; her kisses, warm and soft as the touch of rose-leaves, answered his prayer, and her words were fond as human words could be.

"Since I love you, how could I help but forgive you whatever there might be? I do not know what your words mean, but I do know how well I love you; too well to listen to what others might ever say of you; too well to care what your past may have been. Good night. God bless you!"

"God bless you!" murmured De Vigne, incoherently. "Let me go, let me go, Alma, while I have strength!"...

In another moment the ring of his horse's hoofs rung loud on the stony road, growing fainter and fainter on the evening air, till it died away to silence; while Alma leaned out under the chesnut-boughs, looking up to the stars that were shining in the deep blue sky, now that the golden sunset had faded, with tears of joy on her long black lashes and sighs of delight on her warm lips, dreaming her sweet love idyll, and thinking of the morrow that would bring him to her again.

CHAPTER V.

A Bitterness greater than Death.

As soon as De Vigne reached town he drove to Dunbar's, who in a very few words told him what he wanted of him, which was to exchange with him back into the Dashers, and go out to the Crimea in his stead; but in lieu of the eager assent he had anticipated from so inveterate a campaigner and thorough-bred a soldier, he was astonished to see De Vigne pause, hesitate, and wait irresolute.

"I thought you would like it, old fellow," said Dunbar. "The exchange would be easily effected. I should be no good in the Crimea; the winter season would send me to glory in no time with my confounded bronchia, while you seemed to enjoy yourself so thoroughly out in India, polishing off those black devils, that I thought you'd be delighted to get a chance of active service again."

"I enjoy campaigning; no man more so," said De Vigne, shortly; "and to give up a chance of active service is almost as great a sacrifice to me as anything. At the same time, circumstances have arisen which make me doubt whether I can go in your stead or not. Will you give me twenty-four hours to decide?"

"Very well—if you like. I know you will tell me this time to-morrow that you have already ordered your cases of Bass, and looked over your new rifles. You will never be able to resist the combined seductions of Turkish liaisons and Russian spearing," laughed Dunbar.

De Vigne laughed too; though, Heaven knows, laughter was far enough from his heart:

"Very possibly. I'll send you a line to-morrow evening, yes or no."

"Oh, it's sure to be yes," said Dunbar. "You were always the very deuce for war and women, but I think campaigning carried the day."

De Vigne laughed again, *par complaisance*; but he thought of one woman he had learnt to love more dearly than anything else in earth or heaven. He left Dunbar, went back to his house, and shut himself in his own room. He lit his cigar, opened the window, and leaned out into the night. His honour and his love were at war, and the calm and holy midnight irritated and inflamed, where at another time it might have soothed him. Never in all his life, with its errors, its hot instincts, its generous impulses, its haughty honour, never stained by a mean thought, but often hazarded by reckless passions, had his nature been so fairly roused as now. He knew that he had fallen far from his standard of truth and candour, in the concealment of his marriage, which had gone on from day to day till he had won the deepest love he had ever had, ostensibly a free man; and that knowledge cut him to the soul, and gave him the keenest remorse which he had ever known; for though he had done much sin in haste, his conscience was ever tender, and nothing could ever blunt him to any dereliction from frankness and honesty. But he knew, too, now, that the evil was done, and that to leave her would be to quench all the youth and glory from her young days, and refuse her the sole consolation in his power to give her, which was his love, no light treasure to a woman of her mind and nature.

"God help her!" he muttered to himself, as he looked down into the dark and silent street; "I will be truer to her than any husband ever was to wife. She is my wife by love, by reason, by right, and when others sneer at her or pass her coldly by because she has

sacrificed herself for me, I will atone to her for all—I will give up the world, and live for her alone. Since I have crushed my little flower in my headlong path, I will make up to her by guarding her from all blight or storm. Would to Heaven I were worthy of her!”

That night his resolve was made. To-morrow he would tell her of his marriage—tell her all. If she still loved him, and still wished to live for him, entirely as his heart was bound to the Service, he would throw up his commission and take her to Italy or the Ionian Islands, where he would lavish on her all the luxuries and pleasures wealth could bring, and give her what would be all-sufficient to her affectionate and unselfish nature—love. He would live for her alone; if, in time, he missed the glare and excitement of his past life with men, this sacrifice, in return, he at the least owed her; he would not bring her to the din of cities where coarse glances might pain the heart that had as yet known no shame, and where coarse judges would class her with the base Floras and Leilas of her sex.

Military duties kept him until late the next day. A soldier's life is not all play, though the foes to a standing army are given to making it out such. Several things called his attention that morning, and he had afterwards to attend the first sitting of a court martial on one of those low practical jokes with which raw boys, bringing their public school vulgarities with them, stigmatise a Service that enrolls the best gentlemen, the highest courage, and the most finished chivalry of Europe, whose enemies delightedly pounce on the exception to uphold it as the rule.

The court-martial was not over till between two and three; De Vigne then hastily got unharnessed, and threw himself across his horse. When he had once determined

on a thing he never looked back; sometimes it had been better for him if he had. Yet, in the long run, I have known more mischief done by indecision of character than anything else in the world, and he is safe to be the strongest and stoutest-hearted who never looks back, whether he has determined on quitting Sodom or on staying in it. The evil lies in hasty judgment, not in prompt action.

Right or wrong, however, he never *had* looked back in any course. His mind was made up—if Alma still loved him on hearing all—to take her to some southern solitude, and give up his life to her; if she reproached and condemned him, to fight in the Crimea till he fell—and nothing would have stirred either of his resolves. He rode at a gallop from London to Richmond—rode to the fevered thoughts that chased each other through his mind, many of them of bitter pain and sharp stinging regret, for to the man of honour it was no light trial to say to the woman who had trusted him, “I have deceived you!”—some of them of involuntary self-reproach at the memory of how little he had merited and fulfilled the trust Boughton Tressillian had placed in him, “as a man who will not misjudge my motives nor wrong my confidence.” Yet all fears were crossed, and all remorse silenced, and outweighed by that wild joy of which his nature was capable.

All more gloomy memories vanished, as shadows slink away before the noon, as he came within sight of Alma’s home. He pulled up his horse with such abruptness that the beast reared and fell back on his haunches; he threw himself off the saddle with a headlong impetuosity that might have lost him life or limb, flung the bridle over the post, and entered. The morning was grey and wet—strange contrast to the radiant summer night before—

the birds were silent, the flowers were snapped off their stems, their scattered petals lying stained and trodden on the moist gravel; his hurried steps stamped the discoloured rose-leaves into the earth, and the dripping chesnut-boughs shook rain drops on him as he passed.

He brushed past the dank bushes in haste, careless, indeed unconscious, of the rain that fell upon him. With all the impatience of his nature he glanced up at the house as he approached. He expected to find her looking out for him, to see her eyes fixed wistfully upon the gate, and to watch the radiance of joy dawn upon her face as she beheld him. He wanted to see that her thoughts and moments were consecrated to him, in his absence as well as his presence, and to have in her joyous welcome and her rapid bound to meet him, sure evidence still of her love.

With a strange, disproportionate anxiety he brushed past the dripping boughs, ran up the steps of her bay-window, pushed open the glass door, and entered. There were her easel, her flowers, her little terrier, Pauline upon her stand pluming her feathers and congratulating herself on her own beauty, one of his own books, "Notre Dame," open on her low chair, with some moss-roses flung down in a hurry on its leaves; her colours and brushes, and half-finished sketches scattered over the room—but the mistress and queen of it was absent. There was no sweet welcome for him, no loving radiant face uplifted to his, no rapid musical voice to whisper in his ear earnest impassioned words, no soft caresses to linger on his lips, no warm young heart to beat against his own.

He glanced hastily round on the still deserted chamber, then opened the door and called her by her name. The house was low and not large, and he knew she would

come at the sound of his voice as a spaniel at his master's call. There was no reply; the building was silent as death, and his heart beat thickly with a vague and startled dread. He went on to the staircase and repeated her name; still there was no reply. Had she been anywhere in the house, small as it was, he knew she would have heard and answered him. A horrible unexplained fear fastened upon him, and he turned into a dark old-fashioned bedchamber, the door of which stood open, for in its farther window he caught sight of the old woman, her nurse, alone, in her wicker-chair, her head covered with her apron, rocking herself to and fro in the silent and querulous grief of age.

It is no metaphor that the beating of his heart stood still as he beheld her grief, which, mute as it was, spoke to him in a hundred hideous suggestions. She started up as his step rang on the bare floor, and wrung her hands, the tears falling down her wrinkled cheeks:

"Oh, sir! oh, sir! my poor young lady—my pretty darling——"

His hand clenched on her arm like an iron vice.

"My God! what has happened?"

"That ever I should live to see the day," moaned the old woman. "That ever I couldn't have died afore it. My pretty dear—my sweet little lady that I nursed on my knee when she was a little laughing——"

His grasp crushed on to her wrist, while his words broke from him inarticulate in his dire agony:

"Answer me—what is it? Where is she? Speak—do you hear?"

The woman heard him, and waved to and fro in the garrulous grief of her years.

"Yes, sir, yes; but I am half crazed. She's gone—my poor dear darling!"

"Gone—*dead?*"

The hue of death itself spread over his face. He let go his hold upon her arm and staggered backwards, all life seeming to cease in the mortal terror of suspense and dread.

"No, sir—no, thank Heaven!" murmured the woman, blind to the agony before her in her own half-fretful sorrow. "Not dead, the pretty dear, though some, I dare say, would sooner see her in her coffin, and sure she might be happier in her grave than she'll be now, poor child!"

The blood rushed back to his brain and heart; his strong nerves trembled, and he shook in every limb in the anguished agitation of that brief moment which seemed to him a ceaseless eternity of torture. If not dead she could not be lost to him; no human hand had power to take her from his arms!

He seized the garrulous woman in a grasp whose fervency terrified her:

"Where is she then? Speak—in a word—without that senseless babble."

"Yes, sir, yes," sobbed the old nurse, half lost in her quavering sorrow, but terrified at his manner and his tone. "She's gone away, sir, with that soft, lying, purring villain—oh, Lord! what is his name?—that false, silky, girl-faced lord—a duke's son they said he was—who was always hankering after her, and coming to buy pictures, and cared no more for pictures than that cat. She's gone off with him, sir, and he'll no more marry her than he'll marry me; and he'll leave her to starve in some foreign land, and I shall never see her face again. Oh, Lord! oh, Lord! sir, you men have much to answer for——"

"She's gone! with *him!*"

If she had not been so wrapped in her own rambling regrets she must have noticed the unutterable anguish in his hoarse and broken words as he grasped her arm with almost the wild, unconscious ferocity of madness:

"Woman, it is a vile plot—a lie! She has been trapped, deceived. She has not gone of her own will!"

"Yes, sir, she is—she's gone of her own mind, her own choice," moaned the old nurse.

"I tell you she did *not*—it is a lie," swore De Vigne. "He has stolen her, tricked her, fooled her away. It is a lie, I tell you, and you have been bribed to forge it. He has decoyed her away, and employed you for his accomplice, to pass this tale on me. My God! if you do not acknowledge the truth I will find a way to make you!"

Terrified at his violence the old woman shook with fear, tears falling down her pale and withered cheeks.

"I tell you truth, sir—before Heaven I do. Do you think *I* should injure her, my pretty little lady, that I've loved like my own child ever since my poor master brought her from foreign lands, a little, lisping, golden-haired thing? Do you think I should join in a plot against her, when I've loved her all her life? Don't you think, sir, I'd be the first to screen her and the last to blame her? I tell you the truth, sir, and it breaks my heart in the telling. She went of her own free will, and nothing could stop her. She must have planned it all with him yesterday when he was here: the cruel villain! I knew he didn't come after them pictures; but I never thought Miss Alma would come to *this*. She went of her own will, sir, she did—indeed! Lord Vane's carriage came here between twelve and one this morning; not him in it, but his valet, and he asked straight for Miss Tressillian, and said he had a message for her, and went

in to give it. I thought nothing of it, so many people have been coming and going lately for the pictures: and indeed, sir, I thought he was your servant, for the man looked like one you used to send here, till my boy, Tom, came in, and said he'd asked the coachman, and the coachman told him his master was the Duke of Tiara's son. The man wasn't there long before I heard Miss Alma run upstairs, and as I went across the passage I see her coming down them, with her little black hat on, and a cloak over her muslin dress; and a queer dread came over me, as it were, for I see her face was flushed, and she'd tears in her eyes, and a wild excited look; and I asked her where she was going. But she didn't seem to hear me; and she brushed past me to where the man was standing. 'I am ready,' she says to him, very excited like; and then I caught hold of her—I couldn't help it, sir—and I said, though I didn't know where or why she was going, 'Don't go, Miss Alma! don't go, my darling!' But she turned her face to me, with her sweet smile—you know her pretty, imperious, impatient ways—'I must, nurse!' and I got hold of her, and kept on saying, 'Don't go, Miss Alma, don't—tell me *where* you're going, at least—do!—my dear little lady!' But you know, sir, if she's set her heart on a thing, it ain't never easy to set her against it; and there was tears in her eyes. She broke away with that wilfulness she's had ever since she was a little child: 'I cannot stop, nurse—let me go!' and she broke away, as I said and went down the garden path, sir, the man following after her, and she entered Lord Vane's carriage, and the valet got up in front, and they drove away, sir, down the road; and that's the last I ever see of my poor master's darling, Heaven bless her! and she'll be led into sorrow, and ruin, and shame, and she'll think it's all for love,

poor child; and he'll break her heart, and her high proud spirit, and then he'll leave her to beg for her bread; for that bird's better notions of work than she; and a deal fit she is to cope with the world, that's so cold and cruel to them that go against it!"

But long ere she ceased her garrulous grief, heedless of his presence or his absence in her absorbed sorrow for her lost darling, De Vigne had staggered from the chamber, literally blinded and stunned by the blow he had received. A sick and deadly faintness as after a vital wound stole over him, every shadow of colour faded from his face as on his marriage-day, leaving it a grey and ashy hue even to his very lips; his brain was dizzy with a fiery weight that seemed to press upon it; he felt his way, as if it were dark, into an adjoining room, and sank down upon its single sofa, all the strength of his vigorous manhood broken and cast down by his great agony. How great that agony was Heaven only knew.

He threw back, as a hideous nightmare, the thought that Alma could be false to him; that a girl so young, so frank, so fond, could be so arch an actress; that all those loving words, those sweet caresses, that earnest and impassioned affection lavished on him but a few short hours before, were all a lie. Yet the curse of evidence chimed strangely in; he recalled her blush at his mention of Castleton's name; he remembered that his ex-valet, Raymond, had entered Castleton's service on being discharged from his; the mere circumstance of her having left with anyone, for anywhere, without an explanation, a word, or a message to him—her lover, whom she had parted with so passionately the night before—these alone wrote out her condemnation, and shattered all hope before his eyes.

He sat there in as mortal anguish as man ever knew.

If wrong there had been in his acts and his thoughts it was fearfully and cruelly avenged, and the punishment far outweighed the sin. Across the midnight darkness of his mind gleamed lightning flashes of fiery thoughts. Once he started to his feet—in the delirium of jealousy he swore to find Castleton wherever he had hid, and make him yield her up, or fight for her till one or the other fell. But pride was not all dead in him—nor ever would be while he had life. Since she had gone to another, let another keep her!

And now it was that the great faults of De Vigne's nature—hasty doubt and passionate judgment—came out and rose up against him, marring his life once more. That rank scepticism which one betrayal had engrafted on a nature naturally trusting and unsuspecting, never permitted him to pause, to weigh, to reflect; with the rapidity of vehement and jealous passion, from devoted faith in the woman he loved, he turned to hideous disbelief in her, and classed her recklessly and madly with the vilest and the falsest of her sex. Of no avail the thousand memories of Alma's childlike purity and truth, which one moment's thought would have summoned up in her defence; of no avail the fond and noble words spoken to him but the day before, which one moment's recollection would have brought to his mind to vouch for her innocence, and set before him in its vile treachery the plot to which she had fallen victim;—of no avail! Passionate in every impulse, hasty in every judgment, too cruelly stung to remember in his madness any reason or any justice, he seized the very poison that was his death-draught, and grasped a lie as truth.

How long he sat there he never knew; time was a long blank to him; roll on as it might, it could only serve him in so far as it brought him nearer to his

grave. His brain was on fire, his thoughts lost in one sharp, stinging agony that had entered into his life never to quit it; he sat there in dull stupor till her little dog, that had followed him up the stairs, and now crouched near him, awed as animals always are at the sight of human suffering, crept up and licked his hand, uttering a long, low whine, as if mourning for the one lost to them both. The touch roused him: how often, in happier days, before the curse of love rose up between them, had he smiled to see her playing like a child with her little terrier! The touch roused him, calling him back to the life charged with such unutterable woe. He lifted his head and looked around; the clouds had rolled away, and the evening sun, bursting out in all its glory, shone with cruel mockery into the little chamber which, as it chanced, was her own room. The lattice windows were open, and the wind swept in, stirring the muslin curtains of the little white bed where, night after night, her blue eyes had closed in sleep, as pure and sweet as a harebell folding itself to slumber. As he gazed around him, at all the trifles that spoke to him like living things of the woman he had loved and lost, the bitter agony of his soul was greater than he could bear; the fierce tension of his strained nerves gave way; with one cry to Heaven in his mortal anguish, he fell like a drunken man across the little couch, his brow resting on the pillow where her golden head had so often lain in childlike sleep, deep sobs heaving his breast, burning tears forcing themselves from his eyes, tears which seemed to wring his very life-blood from him in their fiery rain, yet tears which saved him in that horrible hour from madness.

* * * * *

That night he wrote thus briefly to the Major:

"DEAR DUNBAR,—I desire to exchange with you if it can be effected. There is no time to be lost.

"Yours sincerely,

"G. DE V."

CHAPTER VI.

The Bridal Jewels go to the Mont de Piété.

IN their salon in the Champs Elysées, that crowded, gaudy, and much-bedizened room, sat as they had sat twelve months before, old Fanytre and the Trefusis, the old woman huddled up among a pile of cushions, shawls, and furs, with her feet on a *chaufferette*, older and uglier, with her wig awry, and her little piercing black eyes rolling about like a monkey's as she drank her accustomed *demie tasse*, which, as I before observed, looked most suspiciously like cognac undefiled. The younger one, with her coarse, dashing, full-blown, highly tinted beauty not shown off to the best advantage, for it was quite early morning, *madame n'était pas visible*, of course, in common with all Parisiennes, whether Parisienne by birth or by adoption; and not being visible, the Trefusis had not thought it worth her while to dress, but hastily enveloped in a peignoir looked certainly, though she was a fine woman still, not exactly calculated to please any man's taste, used to the sight, and the society, of delicate aristocrats.

"Well, my dear, ain't he killed yet?" demanded old Fanytre, in her liveliest treble.

"No," said the Trefusis, running her eye through the Returns of the 25th October. "Halkett, Nolan, Lord Fitzgibbon—lots of them—but——"

"Not the right one," chuckled the old Fanytre, who, though she had her own private reasons for desiring De

Vigne's demise, as his property was so ruled beyond his power that a considerable portion must have come to his wife, had still that exquisite pleasure in the Trefusis's mortification, which better people than the old Viscountess indulge in now and then at their friends' expense. "Deuce take the man! Tiresome creature it is; shot and sabre carry off lots of pretty fellows out there. Why on earth can't they touch him? And that beautiful creature, Vivian Sabretasche, is *he* all right?"

"Slightly wounded—that's all."

"How cross you are, my dear! If you must not wear widow's weeds, I can't help it, can I? They are not becoming, my dear—not at all; though if a woman knows how to manage 'em, she may do a good deal under her crape. Men ain't afraid of a widow as they are of an unmarried woman, though Heaven knows they need be if they knew all; the 'dear departed' 's a capital dodge to secure a new pigeon. Mark my words, my dear, De Vigne won't die just because you wish him!"

"Wish him!" reiterated the Trefusis. "How disagreeably you phrase things, Lady Fantyre!"

"Give 'em their right names, my dear? Yes, I believe that *is* uncommon disagreeable for most people," chuckled the old woman. "In my time, you know, we weren't so particular; if we did naughty things (and we did very many, my dear, almost as many as people do now!), we weren't ashamed to call 'em by their dictionary names. Humbug's a new-fangled thing, as well as a new-fangled word. They say we were coarse; I don't know, I'm sure; I suppose we were; but I know we didn't love things under the rose, and sneak out of 'em in daylight, as you nineteenth-century people do; our men, if they went to the casinoes at night, didn't go to Bible meetings, and Maintenance-of-Immaculate-Society boards, and Regene-

rated Magdalen's Refugees the next morning—as they do now-a-days. However, if we were more consistent, we weren't so 'Christian,' I suppose! Lor' bless me, what a deal of cant there is about in the world now; even you, whom I did think was pretty well as unscrupulous as anybody I ever met, won't allow you'd have liked to see De Vigne among them Returns. I know when poor old Fantyre died, Lady Rougepot says to me, 'What a relief, my dear!' and I'm sure *I* never thought of differing from her for a minute! You've never had but one checkmate in your life, Lucy—with that little girl Trevelyan—Tressillian—what's her name?"

"Little devil!" said the Trefusis, bitterly; she had not grown the choicest in her expressions, with constant contact with the Fantyre. "I saw her again the other day."

"Here?"

"Yes; in the Rue Vivienne—in a carriage. I passed her quite close; she knew me again. I could tell that by the scorn there was in her eyes, and the sneer that came on her lips. Little fool! with the marriage certificate before her very eyes, she wouldn't believe the truth. The scheme was so good, it deserved complete success. I hate that little thing—such a child as she looks to have put one down, and outgeneralled one's plans."

"Child!" chuckled old Fantyre; "she wasn't so much of a child but what she could give you one of the best retorts I ever heard. 'It was a pity you didn't learn the semblance of a lady, to support you in the assumption of your rôle!' Vastly good, vastly good; how delighted Selwyn would have been with that!"

"Little devil!" repeated the Trefusis again, "I hate the sight of that girl's great dark-blue eyes. De Vigne

shall never see her again if *I* can help it, little, contemptuous, haughty creature!"

"She's a lady, ain't she?" said the Fantyre, drily.

"I'm sure I don't know. She is as proud as a princess though she's nothing but an artist after all. Good gracious! Who is that?" said the Trefusis, as she heard a ring at the entrance, giving a hurried, dismayed glance at her *négligée*. "It can't be Anatole nor De Brissac; they never come so early."

"If they do, my dear, beauty unadorned, you know——"

"Stuff!" said the Trefusis, angrily. "Beauty unadorned would get uncommonly few admirers in these days. Perhaps it's nobody for us."

As she spoke a servant entered, and brought her a piece of paper with a few words on it, unfolded and unsealed.

"What's that, my dear?" asked Lady Fantyre, eagerly.

"Only my dressmaker," said the Trefusis, with affected carelessness, but with an uneasy frown, which did not escape the quick old lady.

"Dressmaker?" chuckled the Fantyre, as she was left alone. "If you've any secrets from me, my dear, we shall soon quarrel. I've no objection whatever to living with you as long as you have that poor fellow's two thousand a year, and we can make a tidy little income with you to attract the young men, and me to play whist and *écarté* with 'em; but if you begin to hold any cards I don't see, I shall throw up the game, though we have played it some time together."

While old Fantyre, who had this single virtue amongst all her vices, that she was candid about them, thus talked to herself over her cognac and coffee, the Trefusis had gone, demie-toilette and all, into the *salle*, where there

awaited her a neat, slight, fair man, with a delicate *badine* and gold studs, who looked something between a valet, an actor, and a would-be-dandy—such as you may see by scores any day on the Boulevards, hanging about the Cafés, or lounging in the parterre of the Odéon.

He smiled, a curious slight smile, as the Trefusis entered.

"*Vous voilà, Madame!* Not *en grande tenue* to-day; too early for your pigeons, I suppose? I dare say you and the old lady make a very good thing out of it, though of course you only entertain immaculate society, for fear you should give the Major a chance to bring you up before a certain Law Court, eh?"

"What did you come for so soon again?" demanded the Trefusis, abruptly, with as scant courtesy as might be. "I have only five minutes to spare, you had better not waste it in idle talk."

"What do I come for, *ma belle*? Now, what *should* I come for? What do I ever come for, pray?" returned her visitor, in nowise displeased, but rather amused at her annoyance.

"Money!" retorted the Trefusis. "You will get none to-day."

The man laughed.

"Now why always keep up this little farce? Money I wish for—money you will give me. Why make the same amusing little denial of it every time?"

"It is no amusing little denial to-day, at all events," said the Trefusis, coldly. "I have none left. I cannot give you what I have not."

He laughed, and played a tattoo with the cornelian head of his cane.

"Very well, then I will go to the Major."

"You cannot. He is in the Crimea."

"To the Crimea I can go to-morrow, *belle amie*, in the service of a gentleman who has a fancy to visit it. But I am tired of playing the valet, though it is amusing enough sometimes; and, indeed, as you pay so very badly, I have been thinking of writing to De Vigne, he will give me anything I ask, for my information."

The Trefusis's eyes grew fiercer, but she turned pale and wavered.

"A line of mine will tell the Major, you know, *belle amie*, and I don't fancy he will be inclined to be very gentle to his wife, *née* Lucy Davis, eh?" he went on, amused to watch the changes on her face. "He will pay very highly, too—what are a few thousands to him?—he is as lavish as the winds; as proud as the devil, and hating *Mme. sa femme* as he does, he will give me, I have no doubt, anything I ask. It will be a much better investment for me; I won't trouble you any more, Lucy; I shall write to your husband at once."

He rose, and took his hat; but the Trefusis interrupted him.

"Stay—wait a moment—how much do you want?"

"Fifty pounds now, and as much this day week?"

"Impossible! I have not half——"

"Glad to hear it, madame. The Major will be the much better paymaster. With his thousands I can get a life annuity, buy stock, take shares, do what I like, even—who knows?—become an eminently respectable member of society! *Adieu! ma belle*; when we next meet it may be in the Law Courts over the water."

"You villain!" began the Trefusis savagely, with a fierce flash of her black eyes.

He laughed:

"Not at all; you have the monopoly of any villany

there may be in the transaction. Adieu! what shall I say from you to the Major—any tender message?"

"Wait," cried the Trefusis, hurriedly. "I have five naps—I could let you have more to-morrow; and—you could take one of my bracelets——"

"*One!* No, thank you, the other plan will be best for me. I am tired of these instalments, and De Vigne——"

"But—my diamonds, then—the ceinture he was fool enough to give me——" She tried to speak coldly, but there was a trembling eagerness in her manner which belied her assumed calmness.

"Fool, indeed!—and to think he was a man of the world! Your diamonds!—*ma chère*, you must be in strange fear, indeed, to offer me them. They must be worth no end, or they would not be the Major's giving. Well, come—I am willing to spare you, if I can, for old acquaintance sake."

When he left the house, he carried with him that diamond ceinture worthy of an Empress which De Vigne had bought, in his lover's madness, for his bride ten years before, and took it up to the Mont de Piété. Two thousand à year was not a bad income, but the Trefusis's dress, the Fantyre's wines, the *petits soupers*, and her numerous Paris amusements, ran away with it very fast; and though écarté, vingt-et-un, and whist added considerably to their resources, the Trefusis was very often hard up, as people who have lived on their wits all their lives not unfrequently are. One would fancy such sharpening upon the grindstone of want might teach them economy in prosperity; but I don't think it often does; *canaille* ever glory in the ostentation of money, and waste hundreds in grand dinners, to—grudge the pineapple. Besides, the Trefusis, too, had a drain on her

exchequer, of which the world and even Argus-eyed old Fantyre was ignorant.

CHAPTER VII.

In the Chersonesus.

ALADYN and Devno!—those green stretching meadows, those rich dense forests, catching the golden glow of the sunshine of the East—those sloping hill-sides, with the clematis, and acacia, and wild vine clinging to them, and the laughing waters of lake and stream sleeping at their base—who could believe that horrible pestilential vapour stole up from them, like a murderer in the dark, and breathing fever, ague, and dysentery into the tents of a slumbering Army, stabbed the sleepers while they lay, unconscious of the assassin's hand that was draining away their life and strength? Yet at the very names of Aladyn and Devno rise to memory days of futile longing and weary inaction, of negligence inconceivable, and ennui unutterable, of life spent for the lack of simplest common sense, and graves filled by a schoolboy greed for fruit—such fruit as in such a land was poison, when backed by a mad draught of raki. Days, when forbidden to seek another foe, Englishmen and Frenchmen went down powerless and spiritless before the cholera, which had its deadly grip upon them ere they heard its stealthy step. Days, when you could not stroll on the beach, without finding at your feet a corpse, hastily thrust into the loosened sand, for dogs to gnaw and vultures to make their meal, or look across the harbour without seeing some dead body floating, upright and horrible, in the face of the summer sun. Days when pestilence was abroad through the encampment from Monastir to Varna.

We went out to the Crimea gladly enough; most of

us had a sort of indistinct panorama of skirmishes and excitement, of breathless charges and handsome Turkish women, of dangers, difficulties, and good tough struggles, pleasant as sport, but higher spiced; of a dashing, brilliant campaign, where we should taste real life and give hard hits, and win perhaps some honour, and where we should say, "*Si l'on meurt, eh bien, tant pis!*" in the gay words of the merry French bivouac-song. We thought of what our governors or grandsires had done in the Peninsula, and longed to do the same—we did not guess that as different as the bundles of linen, with wrinkled, hideous features, that the Tartars called women, were to the lovely prisoners from the convents of flaming Badajoz, would be the weary, dreary, protracted waiting while the batteries strove to beat in the walls of Sebastopol, to the brilliant and rapid assault by which Ciudad Rodrigo was won! I do not like to write of the Crimea; so many painful memories come up with its very name; memories such as all who were there must have by the score. Nothing personal prompts my anger; I liked the campaign well enough myself, having one of the very few tents that stood the hurricane, not missing more than nine-tenths of my letters, enjoying the exceptional blessing of something like a coat, and being now and then the happy recipient of a turkey, or some coffee that was *not* ground beans.

I was rewarded as much as any man could expect to be. I have a medal (shared in common with Baltic sailors who never saw the foe, save when securely anchored off Cronstadt) and clasps, like the privates of the Line, though I am not aware that any infantry man was present at the Balaklava charge. I am perfectly content myself, being independent of that very precarious thing "promotion for distinguished services." But when I think

of them all, my dead friends, whose bodies lie thick where the sweet wild lavender is blowing over the barren steppes of the Chersonese this summer's day, I remember, wrathfully, how civilians, by their own warm hearths, sat and dictated measures by which whole regiments, starving with cold, sickened and died; and how Indian officers, used to the luxurious style of Eastern warfare and travel, asserted those privations to be "nothing," which they were not called to bear; and I fear—I fear—that England may one day live to want such sons of hers as she let suffer and rot on the barren plains of the Crimea, in such misery as she would shudder to entail on a pauper or a convict.

Few of us will ever forget our first bivouac on the Chersonese soil—that pitiless drenching down-pour of sheets of ink-black water! What a night it was! De Vigne, ever reckless of weather, had not even a blanket to wrap round him, and lay in the puddles of which the morass-like earth was full, with the rain pouring down upon him, while Sabretasche, who had loved to surround himself with all that could lull the senses and shut out the harsher world, passed the night in a storm to which we should not expose a dog, in discomfort for which we should pity a beggar;—yet gave away the only shelter he had, a Highland plaid, to a young boy who had but lately joined, a little fellow with a face as fair as a girl's, and who had barely seen seventeen summers, who was shivering and shuddering with incipient ague.

The stamp of their bitter fate was upon both those men; the wounds were too deadly and too recent to be yet skinned over; healed they deemed they never would be. How Violet and Sabretasche parted Heaven only knew; no human eyes had pried in upon them in that darkest hour; they had parted on the very day that

should have been their marriage day; parted—whether ever to meet again on earth who could tell? His trial was known to all; even his own men, who had admired her fair face when she had driven up to the barracks, had caught some glimmering of it, and there was not one who did not, in his own way, reverence the Colonel's sorrow.

De Vigne was yet more altered than he, and I saw with astonishment all the icy coldness which had grown on him after his fatal marriage, which had of late been dissipated, now closing round him again. I could but guess at the cause, when before the embarkation, I, knowing nothing, had asked him if he had been to bid Alma good-bye; and he had turned on to me, his face white as death, his eyes black as night:

“Never breathe that name to me again!”

I knew him too well to press questions upon him, and I was obliged to be content with my suspicions as to the solution. But I was pained to see the bitter gloom which had gathered round him again, too deeply for trouble, danger, excitement, or care of comment, to have any power to dissipate it. He had an impatient, irritable hauteur to his men quite foreign to him, for to his soldiers he had always been invariably considerate; he was much more harsh and stern in his orders, for before he had abhorred anything like martinetism; and there was a settled gloom upon him with which, every now and then, it seemed as if the fiery nature in him were at war, struggling like the flames of a volcano within its prison of ice. From the time he took Dunbar's place as Major of Ours, I never saw him *smile*; but I did see him now and then, when he was sitting smoking in the door of his tent, or riding beside me home from a dog-hunt or a hurdle-race, look across to

where the sea lay, with a passionate agony in his eyes. All he seemed to live for was headlong and reckless danger, if he could have it. The thing that roused him the most was when St. Arnaud, Bosquet, Forey, and their staff rode along the front of our columns before Alma, and we were told what the Marshal said to the 55th, "English, I hope you will fight well to-day!"

"By Heaven!" swore De Vigne, fiercely, "if I had been near that fellow, I would have told him we will fight as we fought at Waterloo!"

It was a bitter trial to him, as to us all, that the Cavalry could not do more on the 20th, when we sat in our saddles, seeing the serried columns of the Line dash through the hissing waters, red with blood and foaming with the storm of shot, and force their way through the vineyards of the Alma—that little tortuous stream where we tasted blood for the first time on Crimean soil, whose name, with all his self-command, made De Vigne wince, more than a Cossack lance thrust through his side would have done. To have to sit through that day like targets for the Russians' round shots, while their storm of balls tore through our lines, and ripped up our horses, was too quiet business for any of us.

We were weary of inaction; our Arm had had little or nothing to do; we were not allowed to push on the pursuit at Alma, nor the charge at Mackenzie's Farm; we were stung by certain individual sneers that we were "too fine gentlemen for our work," and we were longing to prove that if we were "above our business of collecting supplies for the army," we could, if we had the chance, send home to England such a tale as would show them how cheaply the "fine gentlemen" of the Light Cavalry held life when honour claimed it, and would cover our slanderers for ever in the shame of

their own lives. And our time came at last, when we were roused by the notes of Boot and Saddle, and drawn up on the slopes behind the redoubts. The story of that day is well enough known in England. How brightly the sun shone that morning, dancing on the blue strip of sea, and flashing on the lines of steel gleaming and bristling below; on the solid masses of the Russians, with their glittering lances and sabres, and their gay accoutred skirmishers whirling before their line of march like swallows in the air; on the fierce-eyed Zouaves lying behind the earthworks; on our Light and Heavy brigades in front of our camp; on Sir Colin's Highlanders drawn up *two deep*; for the 93rd did not need to alter their line even to receive the magnificent charge of the Muscovite cavalry! How brightly the sun shone,—and how breathlessly we waited in that dead silence, only broken by the clink and the ring of the horses' bits and the unsheathing of sabres, as the Russians came up the valley, those splendid masses of cavalry moving en echelon to the attack! Breathless every man on the slopes and in the valley; French and English; soldier and amateur; while the grand line of the Muscovite Horse rode on to the 93rd, who quietly awaited them, motionless and impenetrable as granite, firm and invulnerable as their own Highland sea-walls—awaited them, till their second volley, rolling out on the clear morning air, sent that splendid body of horse flying, shivered like sea-foam breaking on a rock. Then came the time for Scarlett and his Heavies—and all the lookers-on gathered up yonder on the heights, held their breath when Greys and Enniskilleners, with the joyous cheer of the one, and the wild shout of the other ringing through the air, rushed at the massive columns of the Russians, charged them, shaking their serried masses as a hurricane shakes

the woodland trees, and closing with their second line as it came up to retrieve the lost honour of the priest-blessed lances, mingled pêle-mêle with them, reckless of all odds, cutting their way inch by inch through the dense squadrons closing round them—those “beautiful grey horses” pushing their road with that skill and daring which had once won them Napoleon’s admiration—till the 1st Royals, with the 4th and 5th Dragoon Guards, dashed to the rescue, and sent the Russian columns flying over the plain, like a routed herd of cattle without a leader. How the lookers-on cheered, waving their caps in their hands and shouting rapturous applause, till the heights rang again, as the Brigadier and his Heavies rode back from their assault!—and De Vigne muttered, as he glanced down the line of our light brigade:

“By Heaven! when *is* our turn to come?”

Our turn was near at hand. An hour after we received the order to advance on the Russian guns. With the blame, on whomsoever it may lie of that rash order, I have nothing to do. That vexatious question can never be settled, since he on whose shoulders they place it lies in the valley of Balaklava, the first who fell, and cannot raise his voice to reply, or give the lie, if it be a lie, to his calumniators. If Louis Nolan were to blame, his love for our Arm, and his jealousy over its honour, his belief that Light Cavalry would do the work of demigods, and his irritation that hitherto we had not been given the opportunity we might have had, must plead his excuse; and I think his brilliant courage, and the memory of that joyous cheer which ended in the wild death-cry which none who heard can ever forget, might silence the angry jar and jangle of contention above his grave, and set the seals of oblivion upon his error!

The order was given us to take the Russian guns. For the first time since we had landed a light of joy and pleasure came into the Colonel's eyes; and his old smile flashed over De Vigne's face. We were so sick of inaction, of riding about the Chersonese doing nothing, and letting other men's names go home in the despatches!

At ten minutes past eleven we of the Light Brigade shook our bridles and dashed off with Cardigan, in the morning sunlight, towards the Russian battery. Lookers-on tell me they could hardly credit that so few in numbers, entirely unsupported, were going to charge an army in position; and that they gave us up for hopeless destruction as we swept past them full gallop, the sunshine catching the points of our sabres and flashing off our harness. If they did not credit it, *we* did. We knew it was against all maxims of war for Cavalry to act without support, or infantry at hand. We knew that in all probability few indeed, if any of us, would ever come back from that rapid and deadly ride. But the order was given. There were the guns—and away we went, quickening from trot to canter, and from canter to gallop, as we drew nearer to them. On we went, spurring our horses across the space that divided us from those grim fiery mouths. On we went: Sabretasche's voice cheering us on, and the delicate white hand that Belgravian belles admired pointing to the guns before us; De Vigne sitting down in his saddle as in bygone days, when he led the field across Northampton pastures. On we went. All *I* was conscious of was a feverish exultation; a wild, causeless delight; a fierce tiger-like longing to be at them, and upon them. The ring of the horses' iron hoofs, the chink of the rattling bits, the clashing of chains and sabres, the whistle and

screech of the bullets as they flew amongst us from the redoubt, all made music in my ear. God knows how it is, but in such hours as that the last thing one thinks of is the death so near at hand. Though men reeled from their saddles and fell lifeless to the ground at every step, and riderless chargers fled snorting and wounded from our ranks; though the guns from the redoubt poured on us as we swept past, and volleys of rifles and musketry raked our ranks; though every moment great gaps were made, till the fire broke our first line, and the second had to fill it up; though from the thirty guns before us poured a deadly fire, whose murderous balls fell amongst us as we rode, clearing scores of saddles, sweeping down horses and men, and strewing the plain as we passed with quivering human bodies, and chargers rolling over and over in their death-agony,—on we rode, down into that fiery embrace of smoke and flame, that stretched out its arms and hissed its fell kisses at us from the Russian line. De Vigne spurred his horse into the dense smoke of the blazing batteries as Sabretasche led us in between the guns. Everyone was for himself then, as we dashed into the battery and sabred the gunners at their posts, while the oblique fire from the hills, and the direct fire of musketry, poured in upon us. Prodigies of valour were done there, never to be chronicled. Twice through the blinding smoke I saw De Vigne beside me—the Charmed Life, as they had called him in India—reckless of the storm of balls that fell about him, sitting in his saddle as firmly as if he were at a Pytchley run. We had no breathing time to think of others in that desperate struggle, but once I heard Pigott near me shout out, “The Colonel’s down!” Thank God it was not true; down he was, to be sure, for his horse was killed under him by a round shot; but

he sprang up again in an instant, as collectedly as though he were pacing the Ring in Hyde Park, and vaulted on a riderless charger that was by him. That wild mêlée! I remember nothing distinctly in it, save the mad thirst for blood that at such a time rises in one as savagely as in a beast of prey. A shot struck my left arm, breaking the bone above my wrist; but I was conscious of no pain as we broke through the column of Russian infantry, sending them flying before us, broken and scattered like thistle-down upon the wind, and were returning from our charge, as brilliantly as the Scots and Enniskilleners had returned from theirs, when the flank fire from the hill battery opened upon us—an enemy we could not reach or silence—and a mass of Russian Lancers were hurled upon our flank. Shewell and his 8th cut through them—we stayed for an encounter, hemmed in on every side, our little handful shrouded by the dense squadrons of their troops. It was hot work, work that strewed the plain with the English Light Brigade, as a harvest-field is strewn with wheat-ears ere the sheaves are gathered. But we should have broken through them still, no matter what the odds, for there were deeds of individual daring done in that desperate struggle which would make the chilliest blood glow, and the most lethargic listener kindle into admiration. We should have cut through them, *coûte que coûte*, but that horrible volley of grape and canister, on which all Europe has cried shame, poured on friend and foe from the gunners who had fled before our charge, the balls singing with their murderous hiss through the air, and falling on the striving mass of human life, where English and Russian fought together, carrying death and destruction with its coward fire into

the ranks of both, and stamping the Church-blessed troops of the Czar with ineffaceable infamy.

It was with bitter hearts and deadly thoughts that we, the remnant of the Six Hundred, rode back, leaving the flower of the Light Brigade dead or dying before those murderous Russian guns;—and it was all done, all over, in five-and-twenty minutes—less than a fast up-wind fox-hunt would have taken at home!

De Vigne was unhurt. The Charmed Life must still have had his spell about him, for if any man in the Cavalry had risked danger and courted death that day he had done so; but he rode out of the lines at Balaklava without even a scratch. Sabretasche had been hit by a ball which had only grazed his shoulder; the *raffiné* man of fashion would have laughed at a much more deadly wound. We were not too “fine gentlemen” for *that* work! Days afterwards he looked back to the plain where so many of his Dashers had fallen, torn and mangled in the bloody jaws of those grim batteries, the daring spirits quenched, the vigorous lives spent, the gallant forms become food for the worms, and he turned to De Vigne with a mournful smile, “*Cui bono?*”

True indeed—*cui bono?* that waste of heroic human life. There was a bitter significance in his favourite sarcasm, which the potentates, who for their own private ends had drenched the Chersonese in blood, would have found it hard to answer. *Cui bono* indeed! Their bones lie whitening there in the valley of Balaklava; fresh fancies amuse and agitate the nations; the Light Cavalry Charge is coldly criticised and pronounced tomfoolery, and their names are only remembered in the hearts of some few women whose lives were desolation when they fell.

Winter in the Crimea—the Crimea of 1854-55. The very words are enough to bring up again to memory that sharp, stinging wind, of whose concentrated cold none can imagine in the faintest degree, save those who have weathered a winter in tents on the barren steppes before Sebastopol. Writing those very words is enough to bring up before one the bleak, chill, dark stretch of ground, with its horrible roads turned to water-courses, or frozen like miles of broken glass; the slopes, vast morasses of mud and quagmire, or trackless wastes of snow; the hurricane, wild as a tropical tornado, whirling the tents in mid-air, and turning men and horses roofless into the terrible winter night; the long hours of darkness, of storm, of blinding snow, of howling wind, of pouring ink-black rain, in which the men, in the trenches, and the covering parties and pickets, watched with eyes that must never close, and senses that might never weary; the days when under those pitiless skies officers and men shared alike the common fate, worse clad than a beggar, worse cared for than a cab-horse;—all rise up before one as by incantation, at those mere words, Winter in the Crimea.

My left arm turned out so tedious and tiresome that I was obliged to go down to Balaklava for a short time. The day before I went up again to the front, a transport came into harbour with a reinforcement of the —th from England. I watched them land: their fresh healthy faces, their neat uniforms, their general trim, and all-over-like-going look, contrast enough to the men in the trenches at the front; and as I was looking at them disembark I saw a face I knew well—the face fair and delicate as a girl, with his long light curls and his blue eyes, and his lithe slight figure, of our little Curly of Frestonhills. Twelve months before, Curly had changed

from his captaincy in the Coldstreams to the Lieutenant-Colonelcy of the —th, and had been savage enough at having done so when the Household Brigades went out to the Crimea; but now his turn had come. We met as old friends did meet out there, and had a long haver of the things that had been done in England since we left, and the things we had done ourselves in the Chersonese. Knowing nothing of those fierce words which had passed between Curly and De Vigne, I was surprised at the silence with which Curly listened to my details of the heroic pluck with which our Frestonhills hero had cut his way through the Russian squadrons on the morning of the 25th; knowing nothing, either of the love which had entered into them both for the same woman, I set my foot in it unawares by asking him if he had seen the Little Tressillian before he left? Curly, though Heaven knows life had seasoned him as it seasons us all, busied himself with poking up his pipe, while the muscles of his lips twitched, as he answered simply, "No!"

"No! What, didn't you even go to bid her good-bye?"

"For Heaven's sake, Arthur, hold your tongue!" said Curly, more sharply than I had ever heard him speak. "It is grossest brutality to jest on such a subject."

"Brutality to ask after the Little Tressillian?" I repeated, in sheer amazement. "My dear fellow, what on earth do you mean? What has happened to Alma? Is she dead?"

"Would to Heaven she were, rather than what they say she is: another added to Vane Castleton's list of victims!"

The anguish in his voice was unmistakable. I stared

at him in amazement. The Little Tressillian gone over to Vane Castleton! That girl whose face was truth, and innocence, and candour in itself! I stared at him in mute bewilderment. The bursting of Whistling Dick between us at that moment would not have astonished me more.

"Alma—Vane Castleton! My dear Curly, there must be some mistake."

"God knows!" he answered between his teeth. "*I* do not credit it, yet there are the facts. She has left St. Crucis; her nurse saw her leave in Castleton's brougham, and she has never returned. She must have been deluded away; she never could have gone willingly. He may have lured her with a false marriage. God knows! I should have found him out to know the truth, and shot him dead if he had beguiled her away against her will, but I never heard of it until the day before we sailed. I could not leave my regiment at the eleventh hour."

"Do you care so much for her, then?"

"I loved her very dearly," said Curly, simply, with his pipe between his lips. "Don't talk of it again, Arthur, please; she cared nothing for me, but *I* will never believe her face told a lie."

He was silent; and since the loss of Alma had stung him so keenly and so deeply, that not even the elasticity of his gay, light, affectionate nature could rebound or recover from it, it was easy to understand how it had overwhelmed De Vigne, if, as I doubted not, the love that Sabretasche had predicted had come between himself and the Little Tressillian.

The fierce words that had passed between them were not forgotten. De Vigne was not a man to forgive in a moment. Curly sought no reconciliation. Perhaps he harboured a suspicion that it had been to his friend, and

not to Castleton, that Alma had flown, for he knew De Vigne would have left the woman he most tenderly loved, at any call to arms. They seldom met—De Vigne being in Lord Lucan's camp, and Curly in that of the Light Division—and they avoided each other by mutual consent. The love of woman had come between them, and stretched like a great gulf between De Vigne and the young fellow he had liked ever since he was a little fair-haired, bright-eyed boy.

Curly came just in time for that grey wintry dawn, when the bells of Sebastopol rang through the dark, foggy air, and the dense masses of troops, for whom mass had been said, stole through the falling rain up the heights of the valley of Inkermann.

Curly was in time for Inkermann, and for the winter work in the trenches, where he, so late the Adonis of the Guards, the "best style" in the Park, the darling of Belgravian boudoirs, who at home never began his day till two o'clock, had to turn into the trenches in rain which made the traverses like Dutch dykes, or in blinding snow blown into his eyes; to come back to a tent without fire to food either semi-raw or else burnt black as a cinder; and to sleep rudely, roused by a hurricane that whirled away his sole frail shelter, and turned him out into the bitter black Crimean night. That winter showed us campaigning with the gloss off; no brilliant succession of battles, the space between each filled up with the capture of fallen cities, and balls and love-making in friendly ones, such as make the history of the war among the green sierras of Spain so favourite a theme for fiction and romance; but nothing save an eternal cannonading from the dawn of one day to the dawn of another; nothing but months dragging away one after another, seeing horses and men dying off by scores.

The weary inactivity of the siege, which weighed down even the lightest hearts before Sebastopol, was but one long torture to De Vigne, who longed for danger and excitement as the sole anodyne to a passion which pursued him as the Furies pursued Orestes; while Sabretasche, the most luxurious of voluptuaries, bore uncomplainingly the miseries of that Crimean winter. The wild Chersonese hurricane turned him out at night, shelterless, to the full fury of the storm; his food was such as at home he would have forbidden to be given to his dog; his servant had to fight with another for some scanty brushwood to light his fire; loathsome centipedes crawled over his very bed; he had to wade through mud, and rain, and filth, over paths marked out by the sick and dying fallen by the roadside, with the carrion birds whirling aloft over the spot where the corpses lay. Yet I never heard him utter a complaint, except, indeed, when he turned to me with a smile:

"How horrible it is, Arthur, not to be able to wash one's hands!"

One night, just before we were ordered into Balaklava, a friend of his who was staying on board one of the vessels in the harbour was dining with him—De Vigne, a French colonel of cavalry, whom Sabretasche had known in Paris, a man of the —th Lancers, and myself, making up the party. All of us thought of the Colonel's charming dinners in Park-lane as we sat down to this, the best money could procure, and miraculously luxurious for the Crimea—a turkey, some preserved beef, and a little jam, with some brandy and whisky, for which his man had paid a price you would not believe, if I recorded it *parole d'honneur*.

"I am equally glad to see you, Carlton," said Sabretasche, "but I'm afraid I can't entertain you quite so

well as I did in Park-lane. *Il faut manger pour vivre*, else I fancy you would hardly be inclined to touch much of anything we can give you in the Crimea."

"The deuce, Sabretasche! we have what we care for;—our host," said Carlton. "I wonder when we shall have you back among us; I say, you're quite a hero, and so is De Vigne, in England. Lady Puffdoff and scores of your old loves are gone mad about you, and have been working their snowy fingers to the bone over all sorts of wool things for you and the rest of the Dashers, that are now tumbling about in the holds, and will rot in Balaklava harbour, I suppose, till the hot weather comes."

"Hero! Bosh!" said De Vigne, with his most contemptuous sneer. "If the people at home would just believe the men are dying away here, more than three thousand sick in camp, and would provide for them with just a little common practical sense, they'd do us more service than by writing ballads about us, and showering epithets on us that they'll forget in twelve months' time, when they are running after some new hobby."

(De Vigne spoke prophetically!)

"But you like campaigning, though you rough it, old fellow?" asked Carlton.

"By George! I should say so! If I were a medical man, and had to deal with hypochondriacs, frenzied poets, nervous *littérateurs*, or worn-out public men, I would send them all off to active service. Boot and Saddle would soon have all the nonsense out of them, and send them back much healthier and better fellows. Campaigning is the only thing to put a dash of cayenne pepper into the soup of life."

"Our cayenne gets rather damped here," said Sabretasche. "I confess I miss my reading-chair, my smoking-

room, my periodicals, my papers, my whist, my wines, my club—the ‘sweet shady side of Pall Mall;’—above all, Society. All these are great *agrémens* of life.”

“But confess, Colonel, you’re less fastidious and less dandified?” asked De Vigne.

“I never was a dandy—you mistake. As for fastidiousness, I manage with a shirt a week in the Crimea, because I can’t have more; but I shall have two per diem again as soon as ever I go back. I let my beard grow here because I have no time to have it shaved; but I shall have it very gladly cut to a decent length as soon as I rejoice in a decent valet!”

“Nonsense! What are shirts or beards, compared with the *verve*, the excitement, the reality of active service?”

“Certainly nothing! If our days here were all twenty-fifths of October, they would be delightful,” said Sabretasche, with that sad smile which, when he exerted himself to be cheerful, showed how painful and unreal the effort was. “All I say is, that I *do* prefer an Auxerre carpet to this extremely perilous mud; that I do like much better to have hot water and almond soap, to being only able to wash my hands at very distant intervals; and it would be ridiculous to pretend that I don’t think a dinner in Belgrave-square more palatable than this tough turkey; nor my usual toilette more agreeable than these ragged and nondescript garments!”

“And yet one has never heard a word of complaint from that fellow from our first bivouac till now!” said De Vigne to Carlton.

“*Cui bono?*” smiled Sabretasche. “It all comes in the fortune of war. Besides, there is not a murmur heard out here; the Dashers will hardly set the example! Come, Carlton, you have not told us half the news.”

Carlton told us plenty of news; of marriages and

deaths; intrigues of the boudoir and the cabinet; of who had won the Grand Military, and who was the favourite for the Cesarewitch; of how Dunbar had married Ela Ashburnham, and Jack Mortimer's wife run away with his groom; of how Fitzturf had been outlawed for seventy-thousand, and Monteith made a pot of money at the October meetings; of all the odds and ends of the chat, *on dits*, scandals, and gossip he had brought from the lobby, the clubs, and the drawing-rooms.

"I say, De Vigne," said he, at the last, "do you remember that bewitching Little Tressillian, who was at a ball in Lowndes-square, and whom all the men went so mad about! You knew her very well, though, didn't you?"

Carlton had never heard much of the intimacy between De Vigne and Alma, and never guessed on what ground he trod; by the feeble lamplight I could see De Vigne's face grow crimson with the blood that leapt into it.

"What of her?"

Carlton never noticed the chill stern tone of those brief words, hissed rather than spoken between his set teeth.

"What of her? Only that people say she levanted with that cursed fool, Castleton. I pity her if she did! I fancy it's true, too, because as I came through Paris—where I know he is—on my way here, I saw her in a carriage in the Champs Elysées that was waiting at a door, a very dashing carriage, too. I didn't know her enough to speak to her, but I recognised her in a second—it's a face you can't forget. I should have thought she'd been a cut above that, wouldn't you? But women are all alike."

De Vigne sat quite still without moving a muscle,

but I saw in his face the death-like pallor I had seen there on his marriage-day. Happily for him, at that moment an orderly came to the door with a despatch from head-quarters to Sabretasche, and De Vigne, rising, bade us good night, and went out into the storm of pitiless, drenching, driving rain to seek his own tent.

The next morning a mail came in: there were some letters from Violet, by the flush that rose on the Colonel's impassive face as he received his epistles, and there were more than a dozen for De Vigne, some from men who really liked him, some from Leila Puffdoff, and women who liked to write to one of the most distinguished men of the famous Light Brigade. He read them *pour s'amuser*. The last he took up struck him keener than a sabre's thrust—it was in Alma's handwriting. Twenty-four hours before he would have seized it, hoping against hope for an explanation of that mystery which had robbed him so strangely and suddenly of her. But now, sceptical of all good, credulous of all evil, he never for a moment doubted, or dreamed of doubting, Carlton's story. Circumstantial evidence damned her, and with that insane haste which had cost him so much all his life long, without waiting or pausing, allowing her no justice, no hearing, he tore her letter open, then flung it from him, with an oath, as he saw its heading, "Champs Elysées, Paris." It was confirmation only too strong of Carlton's tale for him to doubt it.

"He has deserted her, and she turns to me to befool me a second time!" was his mad thought as he flung her letter from him; then resealed without reading it, and directed it back to her before his purpose should fail him. So, in our madness, we fling our better fate, happiness away! One letter still remained unread, indeed unnoticed, which De Vigne never saw until he took it

up to light his pipe late that night; then he opened it mechanically, glanced to the last line, and found the signature was that of the valet whom he had discharged for reading Alma's note in Wilton-crescent: "A begging-letter, of course," he thought, too heart-sick with his own thoughts to pay more heed to it, as he struck a match, held it in the flame, and lighted his meerschaum with it.

So we throw aside, as valueless cards, the honours life deals us in its uncertain whist!

CHAPTER VIII.

The Gazelle in the Tiger's Fangs.

Now the truth did, indeed, stand thus: Vane Castleton had gone mad about Alma. I do not mean that he loved her, as poor Curly did, well enough to marry her; nor as De Vigne, who would have thrown everything away to win her; but he was wild about her, as very heartless men, *chères demoiselles*, can be wild about a woman who has bewitched them. He was first of all fascinated by her, then he was piqued by the wish to rival De Vigne, whom he disliked for some sharp sayings thrown carelessly at him; then, he was incensed by Alma's contemptuous treatment of him; and at last he swore to go there no more, to be treated *de haut en bas* by "that bewitching little syren," but to win her by fraud or force. She might hate him, he did not care for that; he did not think, with Montaigne, that a conquest, to be of value, must be *de bonne volonté* on the part of the captured; and if he had been in the East he would have sent his slaves, had her blindfolded, and kept her in his seraglio, without regard as to whether tears or smiles were the consequence. Not being able to act so summarily, and the House of Tiara having been, from time immemorial,

as eccentric as Wharton, and as unscrupulous as the Mohawks, he hit upon a plan seemingly more fitted for bygone days than for our practical and prosaic age, where police prevent all escapades, and telegrams anticipate all *dénouements*. But the more eccentric the thing the more pleasure was it to Castleton, who had something of the evil vanity of Sedley, and liked to set the town talking of his bad deeds, as other men like to make it gossip of their great ones; he liked to out-Herod Herod, and his reputation for unscrupulous vice was as dear to him as though it had been the fame of the soldier or the statesman; he loved his mere approach to damn a woman's character, *à la* Caligula, and if he could win Alma by some plot which would increase his notoriety—so much the better.

On the morrow after De Vigne's visit to her, Alma sat waiting to catch the first faint beat of his horse's hoofs. She had done nothing that morning; her easel had lost all charm for her; Sylvo and Pauline obtained but little attention; and after she had filled the room with flowers, singing soft Italian barcarolles while she gathered them, till the goldfinches and the thrushes strained their throats to rival her, she threw herself down on the steps of the window to watch for her lover's coming, full of that feverish and impassioned joy which can scarcely credit its own existence.

When noon had passed, her restlessness grew into anxiety—she had expected him early; with a union of child-like and lover-like impatience she had risen with her friends the birds, hoping that he might surprise her at breakfast. Twenty times that morning had she run down to the gate, never heeding the soft summer rain that fell upon her hair, to look along the road. About one o'clock she stood leaning over the little wicket—a

fair enough picture—a deep flush of anxiety was upon her cheeks, her eyes darkening with excitement and the thousand fluttering thoughts stirring in her heart; while, with that longing to look well in his eyes which had its spring in something far nobler than coquetry, her dress was as graceful as her simple but always tasteful wardrobe could afford. As she stood thus, the sound of hoofs rang upon the highway in the distance; the colour deepened in her cheeks, her whole face lighted up, her heart beat fast against the wooden bar on which she rested. She was opening the gate to meet him; but,—when the horseman came nearer to her view she saw that it was not De Vigne, but Curly; not the one for whom her heart waited, but the one whom it rejected. He threw himself off his saddle, and caught her hand:

“Alma! for Heaven’s sake do not turn away from me.”

She drew it impatiently away: she held it as De Vigne’s—it was to be touched by no other. Poor Curly came at an unlucky hour to plead his cause!

“Alma, is your resolution fully taken?” he said, catching her hand once more in his too tightly for her to extricate it. “Listen to me but one word; I love you so well, so dearly! Can you not give me one hope? Can you not feel some pity?”

Again she drew herself away, more gently; for her first irritation had passed, and she was too compassionate a nature not to feel regret for the sorrow of which she was the cause. A look of pain passed over her glad face as she answered him, naïvely:

“Why ask me? What I told you two days ago was the truth. I thank you very much for all your kindness, but I could never have loved you.”

“You *would* have done, but for De Vigne.”

A brighter flush rose over her brow; she lifted her

head with a proud eager gladness upon it; she misunderstood him, and fancied De Vigne had told his friend of their mutual love.

"No, no; if I had never known him I should have loved my ideal, of which *he* alone could have been the realisation. You are mistaken; I could never have loved any other."

The speech had a strange combination of girlish fondness and impassioned tenderness; it was a speech to fall chill as ice upon the heart of her listener; he who loved her so well, and, as is so often the fate of true affection, could win not one fond word in return!

Curly's hands grasped the rail of the gate! his face looked aged ten years with the marks of pain upon it.

"He has told you, then?" he said, abruptly.

He meant of De Vigne's marriage, she thought. he meant of De Vigne's love, and answered with a deep blush over her face:

"Yes!"

"My God! and you stoop to listen to him?"

"Stoop? it is he who stoops to me!"

She gloried in her love, and would no more have thought of evading acknowledgment of it than Chelonis or Eponina of evading exile or death.

"Heaven help me, then—and you!"

The two last words were too low for her to hear; but, touched by the suffering on his face, she stretched out the hand she had withdrawn.

"Indeed I am grieved myself to grieve you! Forget me, or, until you do, at least forgive me!"

"Forgive you!" repeated Curly, "what would I not! but forget you—never! Oh, my love, my darling!" he cried, clasping her hands close up to his heart, "would to God you would listen to me. I would make you so

happy: you will never be so with De Vigne. He loves you selfishly; he will sacrifice you to himself; and I, —all that life can give shall be yours,—my name, my home, my rank,—and with time I will make you love me——”

At first she had listened to him in vague stupefaction; when she did comprehend his meaning she wrenched her hands away for the last time, her eyes flashing with anger, passion of another sort crimsoning her brow.

“Do you dare to insult me with such words? Do you venture to suppose that any living man could ever make me faithless to *him*? You are a true friend indeed to come and slander him in his absence! *He* would have scorned to take such mean advantage over *you*!”

With those vehement words, natural in her, but how bitter to him! Alma swept from him. His hands grasped the gate-bar till the rusty nails in the wood forced themselves through his gloves into the flesh, and watched her till the last gleam of her golden hair had vanished from his sight. Then he threw himself across his saddle, and galloped down the road, the ring of the hoofs growing fainter on Alma's ear as she listened for those that should grow nearer and nearer till they should bring De Vigne to her side. She had no thought for Curly, and no pity; I think she would have had more if she had known that never again on earth would she look upon that fair, fond face, which would so soon lie turned upwards to the pitiless sky, unconscious and calm amidst the roar of musketry and the glare of a captured citadel.

She threw herself down upon a couch, excited still with the glow of indignation that Curly's words had roused in her. Impetuous always, she was like a little lioness at any imputation on De Vigne: whether he had been right or wrong, she would have flung herself head-

long into his defence; and, had she seen any faults in her idol, she would have died before she let another breathe them. Scarcely had the gallop of Curly's horse ceased to mingle with the fall of the rain-drops and the rustle of the chesnut-leaves, when the roll of carriage wheels broke on her ear. She started up—this time she felt sure it was he—and even Pauline screamed the name she had caught from Alma, "Sir Folko! Sir Folko!"

But the girl's joyous heart fell when she saw a hired brougham standing at her gate, for she knew that if De Vigne ever drove down, he drove in one of his mailphaetons, with his grooms. Out of the brougham came a lady, tall, stately, superbly dressed, gathering her rich skirts round with one hand as she came up the gravel path. Alma watched her with irritation and no sort of interest; she did not know her, and she supposed she was some stranger called to look at her pictures—since her Louis Dix-sept had been exhibited at the Water-Colours she had had many such visitors. The lady turned, of course, to the side of the house to approach the hall door, and Alma lay quiet on her couch stroking Pauline's scarlet crest, while the bird reiterated its cry, "Sir Folko! Sir Folko!"

She rose and bowed as her visitor entered, and looked at her steadily, with a trick Alma had of studying every new physiognomy that came before her, forming her likes and dislikes thereon; rapidly, indeed, but often unerringly. The present survey displeased her, as her guest slightly bent her stately head. They were a strange contrast! The woman tall, her figure very full, too full for beauty; artistic rouge upon her cheeks, and tinting round her superb black eyes; her attire splendid, her jewels glittering, yet with some indefinable want of the *lady* upon her: the girl small, slight, and simply

dressed, with native grace and aristocracy in all her movements, and her air of mingled child-likeness, intelligence, and brilliance.

Alma rolled a chair towards her, and looked a mute inquiry as to her visitor's errand. Her guest's eyes were fixed upon her in curious scrutiny; she seemed a woman of the world, yet appeared at a loss how to explain her call, and played with the fringe of her parasol, as she said, "Have I the pleasure of seeing Miss Tressillian?"

Alma bent her head.

She toyed uneasily with the long fringe as she went on, never relaxing her gaze at Alma:

"May I inquire, too, whether you are acquainted with Major De Vigne?"

At the abrupt mention of his name, a hot blush came in Alma's face; again she bowed in silence.

"You are very intimate with him—much interested in him, are you not?"

Alma rose, her slight figure haughtily erect, her eyes sufficiently indicative of resentment at her visitor's unceremonious intrusion:

"Pardon me, madam, if I inquire by what title you venture to intrude such questions upon me?"

"My title is clear enough," answered her guest, with a certain sardonic smile, which did not escape Alma's quick perception, and increased her distrust of her interrogator. "Perhaps you may guess it when I ask you but one more question: Are you aware that Major de Vigne is married?"

For a moment the cruel abruptness of the question sent back the blood to the girl's heart, and her companion's bold, harsh eyes watched with infinite amusement the quiver that passed over her bright young face. But it was only for a moment; the next, Alma smiled at

the idea, as if Sir Folko would conceal anything from her—above all, conceal *that*! Her rapid instincts made her mistrust and dislike this woman; she imagined it was some one who, having a grudge against De Vigne, tried this method to injure him, and her clear, fearless eyes flashed contemptuous anger on her questioner; she deigned no answer to the inquiry.

"Major De Vigne is my *friend*. I allow no stranger to mention his name to me except with the respect it deserves. I am quite at a loss to conceive why you should trouble yourself to insult me with these unwarranted interrogations. You will excuse me if I say that I am much engaged just now, and should be glad to be left alone."

She bowed as she spoke, and moved across the room to the bell, but her visitor would not take the hint, however unmistakable; she sat still, leaning back in her chair playing with her parasol, probably puzzled whether or no the Little Tressillian was aware of her lover's marriage. High-couraged and thoroughly "game" as Alma was, she felt repugnance to this woman—a certain vague fear of, and dislike to being alone with, her.

Her visitor rose too, and took a different tone, fixing her black eyes, in whose bold stare spoke a dark past, and an unscrupulous character, on those which were clear with innocence and youth.

"You take too high a tone, young girl; if you do *not* know of his marriage, you are to be pitied; if you do, you are to be blamed indeed; and if you have any shame in you, you will never, out of regard for yourself and justice to me, see Granville de Vigne again, when I tell you that—I am his wife!"

"*His wife!*" With ashy lips Alma re-echoed the words, "*his wife!*" that coarse, cruel-eyed woman, with

her bold stare, and her gorgeous dress, which yet could not give her the stamp of Birth; for Time had not passed wholly lightly on the Trefusis, and now there was more trace of the Frestonhills milliner in her than of the varnish she had adopted from the Parisiennes, for at thirty-seven the Trefusis had grown—vulgar! That woman his wife! Alma, true to her faith in, and reverence of, De Vigne, could have laughed at the mere thought! That woman his wife!—his! when but a few hours before he had called *her* his own, and kissed her, when she spoke to him of their sweet future together! She knew it was a plot against him; she would not join in it by lending ear to it. *He* could never have loved that woman—with her rouged cheeks, her tinted eyelids, her cruel eyes, her cold, harsh voice. Alma did not remember that a man's first love is invariably the reverse of his last!

"You his wife!" she repeated, with a contempt which excited the savage nature of her listener, as the Trefusis had excited the slumbering fire of Alma's character. "You *his* wife? Before pretending to such a title, you should first have learned the semblance of a lady to uphold you in the assumption of your rôle! Your impertinence in addressing me I shall not honour by resenting; but your ill-done plot, I must tell you, will scarcely pass current with me."

She spoke haughtily and impatiently, anger and disdain flashing from her expressive face, which never cared to attempt concealment of any thought passing through her mind.

"Plot!" repeated the Trefusis, with a snarl on her lips like a hound catching hold of its prey. "You think it a plot, young lady? or do you only say so to brazen it

out before a woman you have foully wronged? If it be a plot, what say you then to that?"

Not letting go her hold upon it, she held before Alma's eyes the certificate of her marriage.

"Read it!"

Alma, who had never seen a document of the kind, saw only a printed paper, and put it aside with a haughty gesture; she would have none of this woman's enforced confidences! But the Trefusis caught her little delicate wrist, and held the certificate so that Alma could not choose but see the names with that prolix preamble by which his Grace of Canterbury so graciously permits an Englishman to wed.

Then Alma's face grew white, even to her lips; for an instant her heart stopped with a dull anguish of horror, but, true to her allegiance, refused, even in the face of proof, the doubt that would dishonour him; no thought that was treachery to her lover should dwell in her mind, no stranger should whisper of him in his absence to her! She threw off the Trefusis's hand as though it had been the gripe of an adder's fangs, her soft eyes flashing like dark blue steel.

"Leave my presence! Leave it! It is useless to seek to injure him with me."

As she spoke she rang the bell, and the single servant of the house responded to the summons; Alma bowed her head with the stately grace of an Empress signing to her Household, "Show this lady to the door."

For once in her life the Trefusis was baffled; she knew not how to play her next card, uncertain whether Alma was aware or unaware of her marriage to De Vigne. She had hoped to find a weak and timorous young girl, whom her dignity would awe and her story overwhelm,

but she was cheated of her second revenge. Mortified and incensed she swung round, with her devil's sneer upon her fine bold features:

"Excuse me, Miss Tressillian, for my very misplaced pity! I fancied you a young and orphaned girl, whom knowledge of the truth might warn from an evil course; I regret to find one on whom all warnings are thrown away, and who gives insult where she should ask for pardon." No other motive than pity for you prompted my call. I have been too often the victim of Major De Vigne's inconstancy, for it to have any longer power to wound me."

Then the woman, whom Church and Law termed his Wife, swept from the room, and the girl was left once more to her solitude. *In* that solitude the high-strung nerves gave way; while her sword and her shield were wanted she had done battle for him gallantly; but now that they were no longer needed her courage forsook her, and she lay on the couch sobbing bitterly. Tears had always been very rare with her, but of late they had found their way much oftener to the eyes which should have been as shadowless as the southern skies, whose hue they took; with passion, all other floodgates of the heart are loosed. Her wild rapture had its reaction; vehement joys ever pay their own price. She did not credit what the Trefusis had told her; her own quick perception, true in its *deduction*, though here not true in fact, knew that no really injured wife would have taken the tone of her visitor, nor such means of making her wrongs and her title known; there was something more-over false, coarse, cruel, which struck at once on her delicate senses; she felt sure it was some slander, and the certificate a forgery; she had read of women who had taken similar revenge upon men. "So many must

have loved him," thought Alma, "and so many, therefore, will hate me as I should hate any who took him from me." So she reasoned with that loyal love which, truer than the love that is fabled as *blind*, will, if it see a stain on its idol, veil it from all eyes, even from its own. Still it had left upon her a sort of vague dull weight; she felt afraid, she scarcely knew of what, a terror lest her new-won joys should leave her as suddenly as they had come to her: she would have given years of her young life to look in his eyes again, and hear his voice.

Once more the roll of carriage-wheels interrupted the ceaseless fall of the heavy rain. Alma started up; dashing the tears from her flushed cheeks. She had suffered a good deal in her brief life, but she had never known anything like the terror which, crowding the pain of hours into a single minute, laid its leaden hand upon her when she saw not De Vigne but his servant Raymond alone approach.

"Oh, my God! what has happened? He is ill!" she uttered, unconsciously: her nerves were unstrung by her interview with the Trefusis, and her imagination seized on all the evil that could have befallen him whom she loved so well.

She stood with her hands clenched in the effort to repress the emotion she could not show to a servant, and as Raymond approached her, with the silken suavity which characterised that prize valet, he seemed, for once, to be hurried and anxious.

"Madam," he began, with one of the reverential salaams which would have qualified him to be groom of the chamber, "in riding home last evening, Major De Vigne was thrown from his horse.

"Good God! . . . is he hurt?"

No presence could restrain the agony spoken in those few brief words.

"Yes—much, madam," said Raymond, hesitatingly. "The hurt might not perhaps be so severe, but inflammation, and consequently fever, have set in. He is at times unconscious, and at those times he is constantly speaking of you, Miss Tressillian; muttering your name, and calling you to come to him so incessantly, that the surgeon told me, if I knew who the lady was that the Major meant, to fetch her, for that his life depended on his being kept as calm as possible. So, madam, I ventured to come and inform you. I could not tell what to do. I hope I have done right? I brought the carriage in case you might be kind enough to come——"

All the light died out of the face so radiant but a short time before! She was white as a corpse, save for the blue veins which stood out upon her temples and her hands. She gave one low, deep sob, tears would not come to her relief; and her throat was hoarse and dry as after a long illness, when she answered:

"Right—quite right. I shall be ready in a moment."

Alma's love was infinitely too true, eager, and active, to stand still and weep. She never paused to reason or reflect; all she thought of was De Vigne in suffering, perhaps in danger. *He* wanted her—that was enough! She ran upstairs, her heart suffocated with the sobs to which she would not give way while he needed nerve and action to aid him—took her hat, threw a large cloak over her dress, and was beside the carriage in an instant.

"The Major was riding towards Windsor, madam, so he is now at the nearest house to the place where he was thrown. It is many miles from here," said Raymond, as he opened the door.

Alma bent her head; her thoughts were too full to notice that the man had said on his entrance that his master was riding home, now that he had been going across to Windsor; or to remark the improbability of De Vigne's having gone so far the previous night. The door was shut, Raymond got upon the box, and the brougham rolled away, bearing them from St. Crucis.

The drive was through the heavy rain, which fell without cessation. She could not remember how far Windsor was from Richmond; she knew little or nothing of London or its environs, indeed of England itself, so secluded had her life been since she quitted Lorave; but the way seemed interminable. So horrible grew the long dreary drive, through roads so strange to her, in her fear and anxiety, with the ceaseless sigh and sob of the drenching rain, that Alma, impressionable as most enthusiastic natures are, became nervous and fearful, and excited to a vague and heavy dread of some approaching evil. All her radiant joy of the morning had died away. That dreary, solitary drive! how long it seemed; how horrible the grey, dark storm, the ceaseless roll of the wheels, the wearisome, unfamiliar road! Alma, as if conscious of her doom, cowered down in a corner of the carriage, like a young child fearful of the dark, looking back on the sweet past of yesterday, as beside the grave of one they have loved men look back on the time when the dead lips were smiling, and the closed eyes were bright.

The carriage stopped at last on the outskirts of Windsor, rolled through iron scroll-gates under some dripping larch-trees, through small grounds, very ill kept, with long grass and flowers run wild, and a statue or two, moss-grown, grim, and broken: the very aspect of the place struck a fresh chill into her heart, and nothing

in the house itself reassured her. It was a cross between an old country-house and a lorette's villa, and had an untidy, dissipated, unpleasant look about it to one long used to the brilliant sunlight of Lorave. It seemed a house that might have seen dark stories and painful scenes, smothered from the light of justice, between those irregular and dirty walls. The carriage stopped again before a low side-door, and Alma now thought little of the house—only of the one who had sought its temporary asylum. She sprang from the brougham the instant Raymond let down the steps.

“Where is your master?”

“I will take you to him, madam, if you will have the kindness to follow me,” said that silky valet.

Alma bent her head in acquiescence, and followed him through several crooked passages and tortuous corridors, through which she could not have found her way back unaided; at last he threw open the door of a room, and stood aside for her to enter. It was now nearly nine o'clock; the dense clouds and drenching rain had made it as dark in the country as though it were fully night; and in this chamber, of which the curtains before the windows at the far end were drawn, Alma could see nothing save the indistinct outline of a table and some chairs near her. She turned hastily to Raymond:

“Is Major De Vigne——”

But the valet had withdrawn, closing the door behind her, and she heard a sharp click like the turning of a key in a lock. Then—a deadly agony of fear came upon her, and she trembled from head to foot; horrid sights, sounds, thoughts, seemed to hover round her; she had had from infancy a strange terror of being alone in darkness, and she stretched out her hand with a pitiful cry:

"Sir Folko—Granville—where are you?"

In answer to her call a man's form drew near, indistinct in the gloom, and in her ear a voice whispered:

"My beautiful, my idolised Alma! there is one here who loves you dearer than him you call. If I have erred in bringing you hither, pardon at least a fault of too much love!"

A shriek of loathing, despair, horror, and anguish burst from Alma's lips, ringing shrill and loud through the darkened room,—she knew that the speaker was Castleton! She struggled from his grasp, and mastering her terror with the courage which was planted side by side in her nature with so much that was poetic and susceptible, she turned on him haughtily:

"Lord Vane, what do you think to gain by daring to insult me thus? Major de Vigne's servant brought me here to see his master, who was dangerously hurt. I desire you to leave me, or, if this *be* your house, and you have one trace of a gentleman's honour left in you, to tell me at once where I may find my friend?"

Castleton could have laughed outright at the little fool's simplicity, but he was willing to win her by gentle means if he could, perhaps, for there are few men entirely blunted and inured to shame; he scarcely relished the fiery scorn of the eyes that flashed upon him in the twilight.

"Do not be so severe upon me," he said, softly. "Surely one so gentle to all others may pardon an offence born from a passion to which she of all others should show some pity? I would have told you yesterday how madly I love you—and my love is no cold English fancy, Alma!—I love you, my divine little angel; and my idolatry has driven me perhaps to error, but an error such as women should surely pardon."

"Off! do not touch me!" cried Alma, fiercely, as his hand wandered towards the delicate form that he could crush in his grasp as a tiger's fangs a young gazelle. "Your words are shame, your love pollution, your presence hateful! Insult me no more, but answer me, yes or no, where *is* my friend?"

"De Vigne? The devil knows! He is with his wife, I dare say; he can't hear you, and would not help you if he did."

"It is a lie!" moaned Alma, almost delirious with fear and passion. "He has no wife; and he will revenge for me all your dastard insults!"

"How will he hear of them, pretty one?" laughed Castleton, seizing her in his arms, while his hot breath sullied her cheeks. "Do you think, now I have you, I shall let you go again? I have hardly caged my bird only to let her fly! We shall clip your wings, loveliest, till you like your captivity too well to try and free yourself. You are mine now, Alma—who can save you?"

"I shall never be yours—dastard!—coward!" gasped she, striking him a fierce blow with her clenched hands upon his eyes, in her agony, as she struggled in the iron grasp of his embrace, maddened by the loathsome kisses he branded on her lips—the abhorred caresses that seemed to pollute her with infamy and shame. Involuntarily he loosened his hold one moment, in the sharp pain and sudden blindness of the unexpected blow. That moment was enough for her; she wrenched herself from him, flew across the room, tore aside the curtain of one of the windows;—by good fortune it was open, and, without heeding what height she might fall, leaped from its low sill on to the ground without. The window was five feet off the lawn below, but happily for her there lay

just where she alighted a large heap of cut grass—all that had been mown off the turf that morning having been gathered together just beneath the window. It broke her fall, but she lay stunned till Castleton's voice from the chamber made her spring to her feet, like a hare that has lain down panting to rest in its run for life, and starts off again with every nerve quivering and every sense stretched, at the bay of the hounds in pursuit. She sprang to her feet, and ran along the lawn. The grounds were a labyrinth to her, the light was dim and dusky, the rain still fell in torrents, but Alma's single thought was to get away from that horrible house, to which she had been lured for such a horrible fate. She fled across the lawn, and through a grove of young firs, taking the first path that presented itself, the road through the plantation, which led her on about a quarter of a mile; she flew over the dank wet turf with the speed of a hunted antelope. Yet to her, with the dread of pursuit upon her, thinking every moment she heard steps behind her, feeling every instant in imagination the grasp of her hated lover and foe, it seemed as though leaden weights were on her ankles, and each step she took bare her a hundred steps backward. At the end of the plantation was a staken-bound fence, and a high gate, with spikes on its top rail. Her heart grew sick with terror: if she turned back she would fall into Castleton's grasp as surely as a fox that doubles from a wall falls a victim to the pack. She knew he would pursue her; to retrace her steps would be to meet him, and Alma knew what mercy she would find at his hands. An old man, gathering up his tools after thinning the trees and loosening the earth round the roots, was near the gate, and to him Alma rushed:

"Let me through! let me through, for God's sake!"

she gasped, her fingers clenching on his arm, the wild terror on her face telling her story without words.

The old peasant, a hard-featured, kindly-eyed old man, looked at her in amazement.

"Poor bonny child, where would ye go?"

"Let me through quick—quick, for the love of Heaven!" whispered Alma, panting with her breathless race.

Without another question the woodsman unlocked the gate, and let her pass; she flew through it with a murmured "God reward you!" and as he locked the padlock after her, and took up his axe and spade, he muttered to his own thoughts, "Castleton would flay me alive if he could for that; but I don't care—she's too bonnie a birdie for such an evil cage."

Once through the gate, she found herself where two cross roads met; ignorant which led back to London, she took the one on her right and ran on; the thick drops of the shower, that still fell fast and heavily on her golden hair, that had fallen dishevelled and unbound in her wrestling with Castleton; her heart beating, her delicate limbs, unused to all fatigue, already beginning to fail her, every nerve on the rack in the dread horror of pursuit, strained to such tension that not a bough cracked in the wind or a rain-drop splashed in the puddles but she thought it was his emissaries chasing her. On and on she ran, her hair streaming behind her, heavy and dank with water, her feet soaked and clogged with the weight of the mud gathered fresh with every step, and every sinew throbbing, cracking, aching with that merciless race from what was worse than death. At last she could do no more; with all her terror, all her spirit, ever much greater than her strength, Nature rebelled against the unnatural strain. She could not run,

but she walked on and on, halting for breath, toiling wearily, ready to sink down on the wet, cold earth, murmuring every now and then De Vigne's name, or gasping a prayer to God. On she still went, she knew not where, only away—away—for ever from her abhorred pursuer.

Tenderly nurtured, delicately bred, sensitive as a hot-house flower, this child of art, of love, of refinement, with her high-wrought imagination, her delicate mould of form and thought, her childlike fear of solitude in darkness, suffered tortures. On and on she dragged her weary way, till the dusky haze of rain and fog deepened to the denser gloom of night, and the storm ceased, and the moon came out over the glades of Windsor Forest. She had toiled on till she had reached the outskirts of the royal park, and as the moonlight shivered on the gaunt boughs and played on the wet leaves Alma stopped, powerless to stir again, and a deadly terror of something vague and unknown crept upon her, for her brain was strongly creative, her nerves tender, her mind steeped in poetry, romance, and out-of-the-world lore even from her childhood, when she had believed in fairies because Shakspeare and Milton wrote of them. A deadly terror came upon her; a hundred wild stories that she would have laughed at at another hour rose in chaos before her mind, bewildered already with the horrors of the past day. She was afraid to be alone with that vast silent forest, those cold, solemn stars! She was afraid of the night, of the stillness, of the solitude; she who but so few hours before had been gathered to her lover's heart and sheltered in his arms, there, as she had thought, to find an asylum all her life. She was afraid; a cold trembling seized her, she looked wildly up at the gaunt boughs and silver foliage in the moonlight; no

sound in the hushed night but the hooting of an owl or the clash of the horns of fighting stags. Hideous phantoms glared around; vile shapes gibbered in her ear. One sob rose in her throat, De Vigne's name rang through the quiet woodlands and up to the dark skies, then she fell forward insensible on the tangled moss, her long bright hair trailing on the grass, her fair brow lying on the dank earth, her hands clenched on the gnarled roots.

There she lay; and as if in pity for this fair, fragile, human thing, the summer winds 'sighed softly over her, and touched her brow with cool caresses as they played among her wet and golden curls. She had no power to move, to stir even a limb; terror, fatigue, that horrible and breathless race through the pitiless storm, had beaten all the young life out of her. Nature could do no more; the spirit could no longer bear up against the suffering of the body; where she had fallen she lay, broken and worn out; if Castleton had been upon her she could not have risen or dragged herself one other step. She was but half conscious; wild thoughts, vague horrors, loathsome sights and sounds, indistinct with the unembodied terrors of night-dreams, flickered at times before her closed eyes, and hovered on the borders of her brain; still she lay there, powerless to move from the phantasms of her mind, equally powerless to repel them with her will. All volition was gone; terror and bodily fatigue had done their work, till the mind itself at last succumbed, outwearied, and a heavy, dreamless sleep stole on her, the sleep of nature utterly worn out. There she lay on the cold, dank moss, the dark brushwood waving over her, above her the silent heavens, with their chill, pale stars, while the great boughs of the forest stirred with a mournful shiver, and through their silent glades

moved, with melancholy sigh and measure, the wind of the summer night.

CHAPTER IX.

Between Life and Death.

THE morning dawned; the herds of deer rose from their fern couches, and trooped down to the pools for their morning drink, and fragrance rose up from the wet grass that sparkled in the light after the storm of the past day, and from the deep dells, and shadowy glades, and sunny knolls of the Royal Forest. One of the rangers, a white-haired old man, who had lived in the stately woodlands till he loved them almost as men love their own ancestral homes, was going home for his breakfast, when he caught sight of something gleaming white among the brushwood on the outskirts of the forest, and drawing near, saw Alma as she slept. He was going to awaken her somewhat roughly perhaps, but her attitude touched him, and as he stooped over her and marked the fine texture of the dress, soaked through with mud and rain, her delicate hands, the circles under the eyes dark as the lashes resting on them, and the parted lips, through which every breath came with feverish and painful effort, he shrank involuntarily from touching harshly what seemed so fragile and at his mercy.

He stooped over her perplexed. He did not like to leave her; he did not like to move her.

"Poor pretty child!" he muttered, drawing her thick golden hair through his rough fingers. "Who's sent her to such a bed, I wonder? If she's been lying out all night, she's caught her death of cold. I should like to

take her home, poor young thing; but what would the old woman say?"

The worthy man, being a trifle henpecked, paused at this view of the question; his charity halting before the dread of another's condemnation of it, as charity in the great world shrinks and hides her head before the dread of the "*qu'en dira-t-on!*" He wavered; he could not leave her there; he was afraid, poor fellow, to take her home, lest a hissing voice should condemn his folly, and a shrew's vituperations reward him for his Samaritanism; and his dog, with the true instinct and ready kindness with which animals often shame their owners, began to lick the burning hands with his great tongue in honest well-meaning to do good, and to offer what help lay in his power.

As his master wavered, ashamed to leave, afraid to take her with him, a lady and two little girls, a governess and her pupils, walking before their breakfast, drew near too. The keeper knew them, and looked up as they approached, for they were astonished as well as he at this woman's form, with the white dress and golden hair, lying down on the dark dank moss.

"Dear me, Reuben—dear me, what is this?" asked the governess, a little, tremulous, shy person, while the children's eyes grew round and bright, with wonder and pleasure at seeing something strange to tell when they reached home.

"It's a girl, ma'am," responded the keeper, literally, while the lady drew near a little cautiously; for, though a good-hearted, gentle creature, she *was* a woman, and by no means exempt from the peculiar theories of her sex; and no lady, we know, will look at another, however in distress or want, unless she knows she is "proper" for her own pure eyes to rest upon.

"It's a woman," went on Reuben. "She looks like a lady, too, ma'am—leastways her face and her hands do—and her dress is like them bits of cobweb that fine ladies wear, that are no good at all for wind and weather. If she's been lying here all night, sure she'll die afore long; by the look on her, I fear she's been out in all the rain last evening. She's only asleep now, ma'am, though she do look like a corpse, and you see it ain't a little thing for poor people like us to get an invalid into our house for, maybe, two or three months, and a long doctor's bill, and perhaps in the end nothing to pay it with; and as for the workhouse——"

"Couldn't we take her home with us? I am sure mamma would let us. Don't you think we might, Miss Russel?" asked the younger girl.

"Hush, Cecy! Don't be silly. How could we take a person home that we know nothing about? She can't be a very *nice* person, you are sure, Cecy, or she wouldn't be out here all alone," said her elder sister, reprovingly, who had already learnt her little lesson in the world's back-reading of charity, and had already a special little jury of her own for haranguing and converting people according to the practices she saw around her.

"Let me look at her, poor young creature. Let me look at this poor young thing!" said the governess, her compassion getting the better of her prudence. She stooped over the figure that lay so motionless amidst all their speculations upon her, turned her face gently towards the light, and, as the sun-rays fell upon it, cried out in bitter horror, "Alma! Alma! How can she have come here?" And, to the children's wonder, their governess sank on her knees, by the girl, pushing the damp hair off her forehead, kissing and weeping over her in her astonishment and her sorrow.

"Do you know her, ma'am?" asked the keeper. "Do you know her?" cried the children, in shrill chorus of surprise and curiosity. The poor lady could not answer them at first; she was speechless with bewilderment to find her darling lying here sleeping, with the damp earth for her pillow, out under the morning skies, with nothing to shelter her from night dew or noontide sun, as lonely, as wretched, as homeless as the most abject outcast flying for her life.

Whether she woke or not she could not tell; a heavy, struggling sigh heaved her chest; she tried to turn, but had no power; then her eyes unclosed, but there was no consciousness in them; the lids dropped again immediately; a shiver of icy cold ran through her; she lay motionless as the dead.

"What can we do with her?" cried poor Miss Russel, half beside herself with grief for the girl and powerlessness to aid her, for in her own home she was but a dependent. "What shall we do?" cried the poor lady. "She will die, if she is half an hour longer without medical aid. Poor little darling, what can ever have brought her to this——"

"I'll take her to our house," said Reuben, decided at last. "Since you know her, ma'am, that'll be everything to my missis."

"Do, pray do," assented the governess, eagerly; she would have done anything that anybody could have suggested, no matter how much to her own hindrance, but by nature she was nervous, timid, and undecided. "Take her at once, and pray move her tenderly. I must see the young ladies home, but I shall be at your cottage as soon as you are. Take her up gently. My poor darling!"

Reuben lifted the girl in his arms, and laid the

golden head with no harsh touch against his shoulder. They might have taken her where they would, Alma knew nothing of it. Miss Russel looked at her lingeringly a moment; she longed to go with her, but she dared not take her pupils to see a girl whom their reverend father "did not know." She retraced her steps rapidly, and Reuben went onwards with his burden.

She was as good as her promise. The keeper's wife, with no over good grace, had but just received her new charge, with much amazement and grumbling, when the governess came, and helped her to lay Alma on the couch, bathe her burning temples, bind up her long, damp hair, and then wait—wait, unable to do more, till medical aid should arrive.

For six weeks Alma lay on that bed, unable to move hand or foot, unconscious to everything surrounding her, her brow knit with pain, her eyes wide open, without sense or thought, a burning glare in her aching eyeballs, her cheeks flushed deeply, her long hair wet with the ice laid on her temples—her mind gone, not in raving or chattering delirium, but into a strange, dull, voiceless unconsciousness, in which the only tie that linked her to life and reason was that one name which now and then she murmured faint and low, "Sir Folko!—Granville!"

The night out in the forest brought on inflammation of the lungs; and against her danger, her own youth, and the skill that grappled for her with death, alone enabled her to battle. At last youth and science conquered; at last the bent brow grew calm, the crimson flush paled upon her face, her breathing grew more even, her voice ceased to murmur its piteous wail, and she slept.

"She will live now," said her doctor, watching that calm and all-healing sleep.

"Who is that man whose name she mutters so constantly?" asked Montessor, the doctor, outside her door, while Alma slept.

Miss Russel was somewhat embarrassed to reply; her calm and prudent nature had puzzled in vain over Alma's strange, expansive attachment, half childish in its frankness, but so wildly passionate in its strength.

"Really I can hardly tell. I fancy—I believe—she means a friend of Mr. Tressillian's, of whom I know she was very fond."

Montessor smiled.

"Can we find him? He should be within call, for if she has wanted him so much in unconsciousness, she had better not be excited by asking for him in vain when she awakes. What is he?"

"An officer in the Army—in the Cavalry I believe," answered the governess, much more inclined to keep De Vigne away than to bring him there.

"A soldier? Oh, we can soon learn his whereabouts, then. What is his name, do you know?"

"Major De Vigne," said the governess, reluctantly. Montessor put the name in his note-book. Two days after he called on Miss Russel:

"I wrote to the Horse Guards for Major De Vigne's address. They tell me he is gone to the Crimea. Tiresome fellow! he would have been my best tonic."

The doctor might well say so, for when at length she awoke from the lengthened sleep that had given her back life, enfeebled as she was, so much so that for many days she lay as motionless, though not as unconscious as before, the first words she spoke, which scarcely stirred the air, were:

"Where is he? Bring him here. Pray do; he will come if you tell him I am ill. Go and find him. Go!"

And little as the governess could sympathize with or comprehend this to her strangely reprehensible attachment for a man who, as she thought, had never said a word of affection in return, who certainly had never offered to make Alma his wife—the only act on a man's part that could possibly justify a woman in liking him, according to that prudent and tranquil lady's theory—she grieved solely to have no answer with which to relieve that ceaseless and plaintive question, "Why does he not come? Why don't you send for him?" and, far from quick at a subterfuge, and loathing a falsehood, she was obliged to have recourse to an evasion.

And Alma, too weak to rebel, too exhausted still to recall anything of the past, burst into tears, and lay with her face to the wall, weeping low, heart-broken sobs that went to the heart of those who heard them.

"She will never get well like this," said Montessor, in despair at seeing his victory of science over death being undone again as fast as it could. "Who *is* this Major de Vigne? Deuce take the man, why did he go away just when one wanted him the most? Was Miss Tressillian engaged to him?"

"Not that I ever heard," replied Miss Russel, sorely troubled with the subject. "But, you see, Mr. Montessor, she has very strong affections, and she has led a strange, solitary life, and Major De Vigne was her grandpapa's friend and has been very kind to her since she came to England, but—you know—it would hardly be correct, if he *were* in England, for him to come here——"

"Correct!" repeated Montessor, with a smile that the man of the world could not for the life of him repress at the good governess's prudery, "we medical men, my dear lady, have no time to stop for conventionalities when life is in the balance. If Major de Vigne were

anywhere in this country I would make him come and quiet my patient by a sight of him; all she does is to sob quietly, and murmur that man's name to herself, and if we cannot get at the mind we cannot work miracles with the body. Any shock would be better than this dreamy lethargy; there is no knowing to what mischief it may not lead. I shall tell her he is gone to the Crimea!"

"Whom do you wish so much to see!" asked Montessor, gently, when he visited Alma on the morrow and found her lying in the same despondent attitude, no colour in her cheek, no light in her sunk eyes.

Alma's mind was not yet wholly awake, but dim memories of what had passed, and what had brought her there, hovered round her brain, entangled with the phantasma of delirium. All she was fully awake to, and vividly conscious of, was her love for De Vigne: so strong was that that she started up in her bed when Montessor asked the question her eyes getting back some of their old luminous light.

"Sir Folko—Granville! I am sure they have not told him I am ill, or he would have come. If I could see my old nurse she would tell him—where is she, too? it is so strange—so very strange! Will *you* tell him? do, pray do!" And Alma sank back upon her pillows with a heavy, weary sigh.

Montessor put his hand upon her pulse and kept it there.

"Do you love this friend of yours so much then?" he asked her, gently still.

Alma looked at him a moment; then her eyes drooped, her mind was dawning, and with it dawned the recognition of Montessor as a stranger, and that reluctance to speak of De Vigne to others which was

blended with her demonstrative frankness to him. She answered him more calmly, with a simplicity and fervour which touched Montessor, though the unmasked human nature which his profession had often shown him had made him naturally sceptical of many of the displays of feeling that he saw.

"Yes," said Alma, lifting her eyes to his face. "Yes, he is all I have on earth! and he will come to me—he will, indeed—if you will only let him know. I cannot think why he is not here. I wish I could remember——"

She pressed her hands to her forehead—the history of the last two months began to come to her, but still slowly and confusedly.

"Keep quiet, and you will remember everything."

Alma shook her head with a faint sign of dissent. "Not if you keep him away from me—it is a plot, I know it is a plot! Why am I to lie here and never see him? It is cruel! I cannot think why you all try to keep him away——"

She was getting excited; two feverish spots burned in her cheeks, and her eyes glowed luridly.

"No one is trying to keep him away," said Montessor, gravely and slowly. "Who should plot against you, poor child? But your friend is a soldier, and soldiers cannot always be where they would. There is a war, you know, between England and Russia, and Major de Vigne has been sent off to the Crimea."

He spoke purposely in few and simple words, not to confuse her with lengthened sentences or verbose preparation. As he expected it took instant effect. Alma sprang up in her bed.

"Gone—gone—away from me!"

Montessor looked at her kindly and steadily:

"Yes; it was his duty as a soldier."

"Gone!—gone! Oh, my God! And to war! Gone! and he never came for one farewell. He may be ill, and I shall not be there; he may die, and I shall not know it; he may lie in his grave, and I shall not be with him! Gone!—gone! If it *be* true, let me go to him; God will give me strength, and I love him too well for death to have power over me till I meet him once again."

In her delirious agony she would have sprung from her couch had not Montessor held her down in a firm grasp.

"Lie still, and listen to me. It is true Major de Vigne is gone to the Crimea; probably he was ordered off, as officers often are, on a moment's notice. He may have sent to you, he may have gone to take leave of you, but that would have been at your home, he could not tell that you were here. If you wish to see him again—if you wish, as you say, to follow him to the Crimea—you must calm yourself. If you love your friend, you must do what I am sure he would wish you—your utmost to be quiet and to recover."

She listened to him with more comprehension in her large, sad eyes than had been in them since Montessor first saw her. "Thank you, thank you; you are very kind!" But then her head drooped on her hands, and a storm of tears convulsed her frame. "Gone!—gone! Oh, life of my life, why did you leave me?"

But Montessor did not mind those tears—there were vitality, passion, reality, and strength in them. He left her to go his rounds, and when she was alone, with this shock, all the past, link on link, came slowly to Alma's mind. That horrible race in the midsummer storm, the terrors of that night in Windsor Forest, which had ended in bringing her thither, came back upon her memory;

and De Vigne had doubtless heard of that flight with Castleton, and, accrediting evil of her, had given her up and gone to the Crimea! She could have shrieked aloud in her agony to have lost him thus.

There was but one remembrance which forced her to calm herself, the one on which Montessor had relied; that to dispel in any way this hideous barrier that had risen up between them, she must recover. In Alma, with all her childlike gaiety and reckless impulsiveness, there was much strong volition, much concentrated fixity of will and purpose; she had not a grain of patience, but she had much resolution.

Reuben's close cottage did not facilitate her restoration; light, air, comforts, atmosphere, all that were most needful for her, were inaccessible there. She had barely strength enough to be lifted from her bed without fainting, and Montessor saw that without the freedom of air, to which she was accustomed, she would never be better.

Miss Russel's rector, like many another rector, since he "knew nothing of the young person," would not have thought of wasting one of his spare beds on a stranger "of no connexions," and "you know, my dear, for anything we can tell, perhaps of no very pure moral character," as he remarked to his wife, previous to rustling into church in his stiff and majestic surplice, and giving for his text the story of Mary Magdalene. Montessor was not counted a good man by his rector; indeed, having certain latitudinarian opinions of his own, consequent on his study of man and of nature, and not always keeping them to himself, as privately as prudence and his practice might have suggested, was somewhat of a thorn in the rector's side, especially as in argument Montessor inevitably floored him with extreme humilia-

tion, and the rector being once driven to define Grace by him was compelled to the extremely uncomfortable and illogical answer, for which he would have scolded his wife's youngest Sunday scholar, "Well, dear me, sir;—why, sir, grace *is* grace!" Montessor, moreover, did not always go to church, but preferred strolling in Windsor Forest, and thinking of that great God of Nature whom men dwarf in their sermons and exclude from their lives. Therefore, you see it was very natural for poor Miss Russel to look to the rector, and not to Montessor for Charity; but—and I fancy that is as natural too—it was in him and not in the rector that she found it. Montessor knew that a week or two in a house like his might secure Alma's restoration, while she might linger on and on for an indefinite time in the oppressive atmosphere of Reuben's cottage, close, dark, and inodorous. As soon as she was able to be moved, Alma, too weak to protest against his will, was carried to his house; and there did daily grow stronger and better, and now began to recover as rapidly as she had been slow to do so before.

Mrs. Montessor, young herself, had taken a deep interest in her husband's patient. She received her in her house with delight, and felt a not unpardonable curiosity to know her story, and how she came there that midsummer night. This Alma, as soon as she was able, told her. She spoke very little of De Vigne; his name was too dear to her to bring it forward more than she could help, but all the rest she told frankly and fully, as was due, to her new-found friends.

As soon as ever she had strength enough to write, Alma's first effort was to pen to De Vigne the whole detail of Castleton's plot, pouring out to him all her love and sorrow. When that was done, she sank back on

her pillows with more bitter tears than she had ever shed. Many weary weeks must come and pass away, many weary days must dawn, and many nights must fall, before she could have an answer; and even now, before that reached him, what evil might not have befallen him!

"Would it cost much money to go to the Crimea?" she asked her doctor, as he paid her his visit that evening, fixing her eyes on his with their earnest and brilliant regard.

"A great deal, my little lady."

"How much?" asked Alma, wistfully.

"A hundred or two, at the least."

Her lips quivered, and her head drooped with a heavy sigh.

"Ah, and I have nothing! But, Mr. Montessor, are there not nurses with the army? Have I not heard that ladies sometimes go to be in the hospitals? Could not I go out to him in that way?"

Montessor smiled, amused yet touched.

"Poor child! you are much fit for a nurse! What do you know of wounds, of sickness, of death? What qualification have you to induce them to give you such an office? Do you think they would take such a fair face as yours among the sick wards? No, no, that is impracticable. You must *wait*: the lesson hardest of all to learn—one, I dare say, you have never had to learn at all."

It was true she never had, and it was one she never would learn; she would fret her life out like a fettered nightingale, but she never would endure confinement calmly like a caged bird. Not only would she have gone to the Crimea had she been rich, but had she but known of any means she would have worked her way

there at any cost or any pain, only to be near him in his danger, and to hear him say that for all the witness against her he knew that she was his and his alone. But Alma had to bow before that curse, under which much that is strongest, noblest, and best in Genius, Talent, and Love, has gone down, never able to shake off its cruel chain upon their wings, the barren curse of—Want of Money!

Of course she was desirous to leave Montessor's house as soon as she was able, and warmly as they pressed her to stay, she fixed the earliest day she could bear the drive for her return to St. Crucis. She had not waited till her return to know when and how De Vigne had heard of her flight with Castleton. Old Mrs. Lee had written her word, as calm lookers-on often do write of the fiercest passions and bitterest sorrows that pass unseen before their very eyes, "The Major called, my darling child, and I told him all as I thought it to be, but as, thank Almighty God, it wasn't. He took it uncommon quiet-like, and walked out, and I haven't seen not nothing of him since."

How deep into Alma's heart went those few common words "uncommon quiet-like, and then walked out!" What volumes they spoke to her of that mighty passion, still and iron-bound as the ice mountains of the Arctic; but as certain as they to burst and break away, bringing death and destruction in its fall! More for the suffering she had caused him, than from that which had fallen upon herself, did Alma mourn for the impetuosity, which had flung her so unconscious an assistant into Castleton's plot. "If he die *I* shall have murdered him!" That was the one cry, that went up from her heart every hour.

The day was fixed for her to leave Windsor for St. Crucis. Montessor and his wife were both unwilling to

part with her; for her story had all won them to her; and there was a peculiar, nameless charm in her foreign fervour, joined to the childlike softness of her voice and manners.

"The Molyneux are going to Paris," said Montessoro to his wife, the morning before Alma left them.

"Indeed! Why and when?"

"Well, in the first place, Miss Molyneux must have change of air somewhere. I suggested Italy, but she would not hear of it! her mother, Paris, to which her ladyship has certain religious, social, and fashionable leanings, all drawing her at once; and to that she assented. *Pour cause*, it is nearer the Crimea!"

"Is that Violet Molyneux?" asked Alma, eagerly. They had fancied her asleep upon the sofa. "Is she not married to Colonel Sabretasche?"

"No!" answered Montessoro. "A fortnight before their wedding-day, his first wife, whom he believed dead, came forward and asserted her rights. I never heard all the details. Now he has gone to the Crimea—but do you know her?"

"Yes! Another wife!—how she must hate that woman!" And Alma shuddered as she thought how *she* would have hated the Trefusis if that lie, that fable, had been true!

"And the wife, eh, what pity for her, Miss Tressilian!" smiled Montessoro.

Alma shook her head. "None! If she had left her husband all those years, long enough to make him think her dead, she could care nothing for him."

"Perhaps *he* left *her*. More probable!"

"Is Colonel Sabretasche gone to the Crimea?" asked Alma, disregarding his suggestion. It touched her

strangely, this story of that radiant belle whom she had once envied.

"Yes, and he could hardly have refused the campaign, even had it taken him from his bridal days."

"No; but she would have gone with him!—and they are going to Paris, you say?"

"Yes; I recommended it; so did Dr. Watson, when he sounded Miss Molyneux's lungs, and agreed with me that there was no mischief yet, though there may be before long. After her parting with the Colonel, she lay in a dead swoon, from which they could not wake her. They sent for the physicians and for me; and since then she has never truly recovered; she will smile, she will talk to her mother, to her friends; but her health suffers. Lady Molyneux would like to have a companion for her in Paris; the Viscountess will have a thousand religious excitements and social amusements, in which her daughter will not participate. I did not know—I thought would you——" And Montessoro hesitated; for though he knew how unprovided for Alma was, he had too much delicacy to touch upon it.

"Would they take me?" said Alma, lifting her head. The sentence "Paris is nearer the Crimea" rang in her ear.

"Would you go?"

"Yes, yes—if I am free to leave them when I will. Miss Molyneux was very kind to me; I think she would take me if she knew."

"I will mention it to the Viscountess when I go to town to-morrow," said Montessoro. "Since you know them, I have no doubt she will be very happy to give you the preference, and change of air will do you good as well as her daughter."

Montessoro was as good as his word. Some years

before, Violet's brother, then a graceless Etonian, now a young attaché to the British Legation at Paris, who had been nearly drowned in the Thames, and had been pulled out at last to go through a severe attack of bronchitis, which all but cost him his life, would probably have done so quite but for Montessor, to whom Jockey Jack was so grateful for saving his heir's life, that he gave the doctor the most beautiful mare in his stables, and had him called in whenever there was any illness in the family, though Montessor, at the onset, had mortally offended Madame by assuring her she would have very good health if she would only leave off sal-volatile, and get up before one o'clock in the day. On that Lady Molyneux had had nothing more to say to him till her pet physician, who had kept her good graces by magnifying her migraines and flattering her nerves, had once very nearly killed her by doctoring her for phthisis when her disease was but the more unpoetic ailment of the liver. Since that time he had always had a certain influence over the Viscountess, possibly because he was the only man who had seen her without her rouge, and told her the truth courteously but uncompromisingly, and when he mentioned Alma as a companion for Violet, her ladyship graciously acquiesced. "Miss Tressillian! She did not recollect the name. Very likely she had seen her, but she really could not remember. Artist, was she? Oh, she thought she *had* some recollection of a girl Violet patronised, but she couldn't remember. If Mr. Montessor recommended her, that was everything; as long as she was ladylike, and of unimpeachable character, that was all she required. She only wanted her to be with them in case Violet were unwell or declined society. She must be free to leave them any day she chose? What a very singular stipulation! However, rather

than have any more trouble about it, would he have the goodness to tell her she would give her fifty guineas and her travelling expenses; and they should leave London that day week."

"Fifty guineas! Less than her maid makes by her place!" thought Montessor, as he threw himself into a hansom to drive back to the Waterloo station. He was a generous man himself; he had no cant of benevolence about him; he considered that to people delicately nurtured, the struggles, the mortification, the narrowed lines of poverty are far harder than to the poor, born amidst squalor, nurtured in deprivation, whose most resplendent memories and dreams are of fat bacon and fried potatoes. He was generous, but discriminately so: and though he compelled his just dues from the man who had lamb and peas at their earliest, while by a woe-begone face and dexterous text he was making the rector believe him an object of profoundest pity, Montessor would not take a farthing from the young girl, on whose delicate organisation and quick susceptibilities he knew the poverty, from which her own talents had alone protected her, and from which in illness they could not guard her, must prey heavily.

CHAPTER X.

One of those whom England has forgotten.

THE chill Crimean winds blew from the North of Sebastopol, and the dust whirled and skerried before our eyes, as we kept the line in front of Cathcart's-hill on the morning of the 8th September, while the Guards stood ready in Woronzoff-road, and the Second and Light Divisions moved down to the trenches, and the Staff stationed themselves in the second parallel of the

Green Hill Battery, and the amateurs, who had come out to see what was doing in the Crimea, as they went other years to Norwegian fishing or Baden roulette, were scattered about in yachting costume, and stirred to a little excitement as the Russian shells began to burst among us, and the bombs to fall with thuds loud enough to startle the strongest nerves.

What would young ladies at home, full of visions of conquering heroes and myrtle and bay leaves, and all the pomp and circumstances of war, have said if, in that cold, dusty, raw Crimean morning, they had seen General Simpson, with only nose and eyes exposed, coddled up in a great-coat; and General Jones, a hero in spite of costume, in his red *bonnet de nuit*, a more natural accompaniment to a Caudle lecture than to a siege; and Sir Richard, with his pocket-handkerchief tied over his ears after the manner of old ladies afflicted with catarrh? Ah me! it was not much like Davy Baird leading the forlorn hope under the hot sun of Seringapatam, or Wellington, "pale but ever collected," giving his prompt orders from the high ground behind San Christoval! Yet, God knows, there was daring and gallantry enough that day to have made of the Redan a second Ciudad Rodrigo; that it was not so, was no fault of the troops; the men whom Unett and Windham tossed up to lead, would, had they been allowed, have given England Success as they gave her Pluck; and the dead bodies piled high on the slopes of the Great Redan were offered up as cheerfully as though the fancied paradise of the Mahometan soldier awaited them, instead of the ordinary rewards of the British one—abuse and oblivion.

We could see little beyond the great dull parapets of the Redan, and the troops that were pouring into and over it, and, though they were forced back again under

the dense smoke of the Russian musketry, twice capturing the position, and twice pushed back down the slopes, slippery with human blood and piled with human bodies. It was afterwards, from the wounded that were brought down the Woronzoff-road, and from the remnant that came back unscathed from the reeking salient, that we heard the detail of the struggle.

We heard how three times Windham sent for the support, without which nothing decisive could be done in that fatal scene of carnage, where the British, unbacked, had nothing but broken ranks to oppose to the steady fire of the enemy, and to the fresh troops who were swarming from the town and the evacuated Malakoff. We heard how, when at last he had leave "to take the Royals," the permission came too late. We heard how hand-to-hand our fellows stood their ground against the granite mass, that, swelling every moment from the rear, pressed down upon them, till those who had held the salient (unsupported for an hour and three-quarters, under a fire that thinned their ranks as a scythe mows down meadow grass, grappling to the last with the Russians in the embrace of death) were forced from the loose earth and breaking gabions which made their ground, pelted with great stones, and driven down by the iron tramp that crushed alike friend and foe, till slipping, panting, bleeding, exhausted, *pêle-mêle* they fell on to the mass of bayonets, muskets, and quivering life mingled together in the ditch below; the men rolling over each other like loose stones down a crevasse; the living crushed by the dead, the dying struggling under the weight of the wounded; the scarps giving way and burying the living, while those who could struggle from the horrible heap of human life, where the men lay four deep, ran for life and death to reach the English trench.

We heard that, and more too. Sad stories passed from one to another. We were all down in the mouth that night; for though the officers had been game as men could be, flinging down their lives as of no account, their men had not imitated them; and it was hardly the tale that we, after the long winter of '54-'55, and the weary, dreary, hopeless months of inaction, had hoped to be rewarded with, by sending home to England. Wellington was wont to say that the saddest thing, after a defeat, was a victory. I think his iron heart would have broken over the loss of human life, on the parapets of the Redan.

We knew that Curly was to lead the —th with the Light Division that day, and we thought of him anxiously enough when we saw from Cathcart's-hill the smoke pouring out from the rugged parapets, and the troops fighting their way over, only to be sent forth again decimated and exhausted.

I saw him early on the morning of the 8th, when we were all looking forward to the attack, as he was chatting with some other fellows, dressed in that careless nondescript costume which dandies of the Queen's had adopted, his old gay smile on his lips, a cap much the worse for wind and weather on those silky yellow locks that we had teased his life out about in the old school-days; and a pipe of good Turkish tobacco peering out from beneath his long blond moustaches. As we paced past him in the raw grey morning, I laughingly wished him good luck; he laughed, too, as he told us he was going in for the honours now. De Vigne, as we passed, pulled up his horse for a second, bent from his saddle, and gave him his hand, with a sudden impulse; for the first moment Curly's eyes flashed with angry fire; then the better spirit in him conquered, his hand closed firm

and warm on De Vigne's, and they looked at one another as they had used to do in days gone by, before the love of woman had parted them.

There was no time for speech; that cordial shake of their hands was their silent greeting and farewell, and we rode onwards to form the line on Cathcart's Hill. I think De Vigne thought more than once of his old school pet, when, from our post, we saw the ramparts of the Redan belching forth fire and smoke, and the ambulances coming down the Woronzoff-road with their heavy and pitiful burdens. Both he and I, I fancy, thought a good deal about Curly that day, as we saw them through the clouds of dust and smoke scale the parapet, then lost them amidst the obscurity which the fire of the musketry and the flames of the burning embrasure raised around the scene of carnage and confusion; and whether he was there among the remnant who were forced over the parapet and fell, or jumped, pêle-mêle into that mass of human misery below, where English pluck was still so strong among them that some laughs they say were heard at their own misery, we could not tell. But late that night, Kennedy, one of his sergeants, told to De Vigne and me and a few other men another of those stories of individual heroism so great in their example, so unfortunate in their reward; telling it in rough, brief words, with an earnestness that gave it eloquence to us, with those frowning ramparts in front, and those crowded hospitals behind:

"We was a'most the first into the Redan, Major. When I see the ladders, so few, and what there was on 'em so short, I began to think as how we should never get in at all, but Colonel Brandling, he leaped into the ditch and scrambled up the other side as quick as a cat, with a cheer to do your heart good, and we went a'course

after him and scaled the parapet, while the Russians ran back and got behind the traverses to fire upon us as soon as we got atop. What possessed 'em I don't know, Major, but you've heard that some of our men began loading and file-firing instead of follering their officers to the front; so many trench-bred infantry men *will* keep popping away for ever if you let 'em; but the Colonel led on to the breastwork with his cigar in his mouth, just where he'd put it for a lark when he jumped on the parapet. There was nobody to support us, and our force weren't strong enough to carry it, and we had to go back and get behind the traverses, where our men were firing on the Russians, and there we stayed, sir, packed together as close as sheep in a fold, firing into the Redan as long as our powder lasted. I can't tell you, Major, very well how it all went on; it wasn't a right assault like, it was all hurry-scurry and confusion, and though the officers died game, they couldn't form the troops 'cause they were so few, sir, and the salient so narrow. But it was the Colonel I was to tell you about, Major. I was beside him a'most all the time. At first he seemed as if nothing *would* hit him; one ball knocked his cap off, and another grazed his hair, but he took it all as careless as if he was at a ball, and he just turned to me, sir, with his merry smile: 'Quick work, eh, Kennedy?' Them was the last words he spoke, sir. Just at that minute the enemy charged us with the bayonet, and the devils behind 'em began to pour volleys on us from the breastwork. Four of them Russians closed round the Colonel, and he'd nothing but his sword against their cursed bayonets. I closed with one on 'em; he was as hard as death to grip with. The Colonel killed two of 'em off hand, though they was twice as big as he, but the third, just as his arm was

lifted, ran him right through the left lung. Then he fell straight down, Major, and I was a-going to fight my way to him and carry him off in my arms, and I *would* ha' done it, sir, too, but the Russians pressed so hard on the front ranks that they pushed us straight off the parapet, and I only caught a sight of the Colonel lifting himself up on his elbow, and waving us on with a smile—God bless him!—and then I fell over into the ditch, with Pat O'Leary a-top of me, and I see him no more, Major, and he must be dead, sir, or else a prisoner in that d—d city."

And honest Kennedy, whose feeling had carried him beyond recollection of delicate language or other presence than his own, stopped abruptly. In his own words, he "felt like a fool," for Curly, like Eman of the 41st, was loved by all the men who served under him.

De Vigne set his teeth hard as he listened. Memories of his Frestonhills' pet thronged upon him; the little fellow who had been so eager for his notice, so proud of his patronage; the merry, light-hearted child, with his golden locks and his fearless spirits; the wild young Cantab; the dandy Guardsman; the warm, true, honest heart, unstained by the world he lived in; the friend, the rival! Poor little Curly!—and he was lying yonder, behind those smoking ramparts, wounded and a prisoner—perhaps dead!

For an instant De Vigne's eyes flashed with eagle glance over the stormed city, lying there grim and gaunt, in the shadow of the grey-hued day; I believe he would not have hesitated to cross those death-strewn lines alone, and rescue Curly or fall with him.

The Crimea is not so far distant but the world knows how we were awakened, the morning after, by the Russian general's masterly retreat, by thunder louder than

that which had stunned our ears for twelve months long, by the explosion of the Flagstaff and Garden batteries, by the tramp of those dense columns of Russian infantry passing to the opposite side, by the glare of the flames from Fort Nicholas, by the huge columns of black smoke rising from Fort Paul, by the sight of that fair and stately Empress of the Euxine abandoned and in flames. Little did the people at home—hearing Litanies read and hymns sung in the village churches among the fresh English woodlands—dream what a grand funeral mass for our dead was shaking the earth with its echoes that Sabbath morning in the Crimea.

It was as late as Wednesday before De Vigne and I got passes from the Adjutant-General's office, and went into the town before whose granite ramparts we had lain watching and waiting for twelve weary months. What a road it was through the French works! A very fair Rosamond's maze of trenches, zig-zags, and parallels, across the sap, threading our way through the heaps of dead, where the men lay so thickly one on the other, just as they had fallen, shoulder to shoulder, till we were inside the Malakoff.

Four piles of dead were heaped together like broken meat on a butcher's stall—not a whit more tenderly—and cleared out of the way like carrion; the ground was broken up into great pools of blood, black and noisome; troops of flies were swarming like mimic vultures on bodies still warm, on men still conscious, crowding over the festering wounds (for these men had lain there since Saturday at noon!), buzzing their death-rattle in ears already maddened with torture. *That* was what we saw in the Malakoff, what we saw a little later in the Great Redan, where among cookhouses, brimful of human blood, English and Russian lay clasped together in a fell

embrace, petrified by death; where the British lay in heaps, mangled beyond recognition by their dearest friends, or scorched and blackened by the recent explosions; and where—how strange they looked there!—there stood outside the entrance of one of the houses, a vase of flowers, and a little canary!

But we did not stay to notice the once white and stately city, now black and broken with our shot; we went straight on towards Fort Paul, as yet untouched, where stood the hospital, that chamber of horrors, that worse than charnel-house, from which strong men retreated, unable to bear up against the loathsome terrors it enclosed. That long low room, with its arched roof, its square pillars, its dim, cavernous light coming in through the shattered windows, was a sight worse than all the fabled horrors of painter, or poet, or author; full of torment—torment to which the cruelest torture of Domitian or Nero were mercy—a hell where human frames were racked with every possible agony, not as a chastisement for sin, but as a reward for heroism! De Vigne, used as he had been to death and pain, closed his eyes involuntarily as he entered. There they lay, packed as closely together as dead animals in a slaughter-house—the many Russians, the few English soldiers, who had been dragged there after the assault, to die as they might; they would but have cumbered the retreat, and their lives were valueless now! There they lay; some on the floor that was slippery with blood like a shamble; some on pallets saturated with the stream that carried away their life in its deadly flow; some on straw, crimson and noisome, the home of the most horrible vermin; some dead hastily flung down to be out of the way, black and swollen, a mass of putrefaction, the eyes forced from the sockets, the tongue protruding, the features distended

in hideous grotesqueness: others dead, burnt and charred in the explosion, a heap of blanched bones and gory clothes and blackened flesh, the men who but a few hours before had been instinct with health and hope and gallant fearless life! Living men in horrible companionship with these corpses, writhing in torture which there was no hand to relieve, no help from heaven or earth to aid, with their jagged and broken limbs twisted and powerless, were calling for water, for help, for pity; shrieking out in wild delirium or disconnected prayer the name of the woman they had loved or the God who had forsaken them, or rolling beneath their wretched beds in the agony of pain and thirst which had driven them to madness, glaring out upon us with the piteous helplessness of a hunted animal, or the ferocious unconsciousness of insanity.

We passed through one of these chambers of terrors, our hearts sickened and our senses reeling at the hideous sight, the intolerable stench, that met us at every step. Great God! what must those have endured who lay there days and nights with not a drop of water to soften their baked throats, not a kind touch to bind up their gaping wounds, not a human voice to whisper pity for their anguish; before their dying eyes scenes to make a strong man reel and stagger, and in their dying ears the shrieks of suffering equal to their own, the thunder of exploding magazines, the shock of falling fortresses, the burst of shells falling through the roof, the hiss and crash and roar of the flaming city round them!

We passed through one chamber in which we saw no one who could be Curly, or at least who we could believe was he; for few of the faces there could have been recognised by their nearest and their dearest, since not Edith's quest of Harold wanted so keen an eye of

love as was needed to seek for friend or brother in the hospital of Sebastopol.

We entered a second room, where the sights and the odours were yet more appalling than in the first. Beside one pallet De Vigne paused and bent down; then his dark bronze cheek grew white, and he dropped on his knee beside the wretched bed—at last he had found Curly. Curly! still alive, in that scene of misery, lying on the mattress that was soaked through with his life-blood, the wound in his shoulder open and festering, his eyes closed, his bright hair dull and damp with the dew of suffering that stood upon his brow, his face of a livid blue-white hue; the gay, gallant, chivalrous English gentleman, thrown down to die, as he would not have had a dog left in its suffering. On one side of him was a black charred corpse, swollen in one place, burnt to the bone in another; the woman that loved him best could not have known that hideous mass! On the other side of him, close by, was a young Russian officer but just dead, with his hands, small and fair as a girl's, filled with the straw that he had clutched at in his death-agony; and between these two dead men lay Curly.

De Vigne knelt down beside him, lifting his head upon his arm. "My God, Arthur, is he dead?"

At the familiar voice his eyes unclosed, first with a dreamy vacant stare in them—his mother's heart would have broken at the wreck of beauty in that face, so fair, so delicate, but a few days before!

"Curly, Curly, dear old fellow!—don't you know me?"

Curly looked at him dreamily, unconsciously. "What! is that the prayer-bell? Is the Doctor waiting?"

His thoughts were back among the old school-days at Frestonhills, when we first met at the old Chancery—

when we little thought how we were doomed to part under the murderous shadow of Fort Paul.

De Vigne bent nearer to him. "Look at me, dear old boy. You must know *me*, Curly."

But he did not; his head tossed wearily from side to side, the fever of his wounds had mounted to his brain, and he moaned out delirious, disconnected words.

"Why don't they form into line, Kennedy—why don't they form into line? If there were more of us, we could take that breastwork. Water?—water! Is there not a drop of water *anywhere*? We shall die of thirst. I should like to die in harness, but it is hard to die of thirst like a mad dog—like a mad dog—ha! ha!" (Both of us shuddered, as the mocking, hideous laughter rang through the chamber of death.) "Alma! Who talked of Alma? Can't you bring her here before I die? I think she would be kinder to me now, perhaps; I loved her very much; she did not care for me—she loves De Vigne. You know how I have hated him—my God! how I have hated him—and yet—Oh, for mercy sake, give me water—water for the love of Heaven!"

At the muttered raving words De Vigne's face grew as livid for the moment as that of the dead Russian beside him, and his hand trembled as he took a flask from his belt that he had filled with brandy before starting, and held it to Curly's lips. How eagerly he drank and drank, as if life and reason would flow back to him with that draught! For a time it gave him strength to fling off the faintness and delirium fastening upon him, his eyes grew clearer and softer, and as De Vigne raised him into a sitting posture, and supported him on his arm with all the gentle care of a woman, he revived a little, and looked at him with a conscious and grateful regard.

"De Vigne! How do you come here! Where am I? Oh! I know; is the city taken, then?"

Dying as he was, the old spirit in him rallied and flashed up for a brief moment, while De Vigne told him how the Russians had retreated, leaving Sebastopol in flames. But he was too far gone to revive long; he lay with his head resting on De Vigne's arm, his eyelids closed again, his breathing faint and quick, all his beauty, and his manhood, and his strength, stricken down into the saddest wreck that human eyes can see and human passions cause. Few could have recognised him in the wounded wretch who was stretched on that gore-stained pallet, with his life ebbing away simply for want of that common care that a friendless beggar would have been given at home.

"Is the city won?" he asked again; his low and feeble words scarcely heard in the shrieks, the moans, the muttered prayers, the groans, the oaths around him.

"Yes; they have abandoned it to us," De Vigne answered, not heeding the pestilence of which the air was reeking, and from which many a man as strong as he had turned heart-sick away.

"I am glad of that," said Curly, dreamily. "England is sure to win; she is never beaten, is she? I should like to fight once more for her, but I never shall, old fellow; the days here—how many are they?—have done for me. It is hard to die like this, De Vigne?" And a shudder ran through his frame, that was quivering with every torture. "But tell my mother I die quite content, quite happy. Tell her not to regret me, I have thought of her often, very often—and bid my father if he loves me, to be kinder to Gus—Gus was a good old boy, though we made game of him."

Curly paused; slowly and painfully as he had spoken,

the exertion was greater than his fading strength could bear; he, three days before, full of manly vigour, grace, and beauty, was powerless as a new-born child; helpless as a paralysed old man; stricken down like a gracious and beautiful cedar-tree by the hacking strokes of the woodman's axe, its life crushed, its glory withered, only to be piled amidst a heap of others to make the bonfires for a conqueror's ovalion!

De Vigne bent over him, his cheek growing whiter as he thought of the boy's early promise and sunny boyhood, and of the man's death, amidst such horror, filth, and desolation as England would have shuddered to compel her paupers, her convicts, nay, the very unowned dogs about her streets, to suffer in; yet made small count of having forced on her heroes, to die in like murrained cattle.

"Curly, dear Curly," he whispered, pushing off the clammy hair from Brandling's forehead as gently as any woman, "why talk of death? Once out of this d—d hole you will get well, old fellow; you *SHALL* get well. We shall have many a day together still at home."

Curly smiled faintly:

"No! I do not die from the wounds; what has killed me, De Vigne"—and at the memory the old delirious vagueness grew over his eyes, which wandered away into the depths of his dire prison-house—"have been the sights, the scents, the sounds. Oh, my God, the horrors I have seen! In sermons we used to hear them try sometimes to describe a hell; if those preachers had been here as I have been, they would have seen we don't want devils to help us make one—men are quite enough! The stench, the ravings, the roar of the flames round us, the vile creeping things, the blasphemy, the prayers, the horrible thirst—O God! I *prayed* for madness; prayed

for it as I never prayed for anything in all my life before, and yet, I am no coward either!"

He stopped again, a deathly grey spread over his face, and a cold shiver ran through him; the brain, last of all to die, the part immortal and vital amidst so much death, triumphed yet awhile over the dissolution of the body. Curly knew that he was dying fast, and signed De Vigne down nearer still to him.

"When the war is over, and you go back to England, first of all try and seek out Alma."

The fierce red blood crimsoned De Vigne's very brow; had it been a living and not a dying man who had dared to breathe that name to him, he would have provoked a reply he would have little cared to hear. All the mad passion, all the infinite tenderness there were in his heart, for his lost love, rose up at the abrupt mention of her.

"Will you promise me?" asked Curly; "to give me peace in my death-hour, promise me."

"No," said De Vigne, between his teeth, clenched like an iron vice. "I cannot promise you. Why should you wish me? You loved her yourself——"

"*Because* I loved her myself, because I love her still; love her so well, that is the thought that in my grave I shall never hear her voice, never see her eyes, *never meet her again*, that makes me shrink from death," said Curly; an unutterable tenderness and despair in those faint broken tones whose last utterance was Alma's name. "I *do* love her, too well to believe what you believe, that she is Castleton's mistress."

De Vigne's hands clenched the straw of the pallet like a man in bodily agony.

"For God's sake be silent! Do not drive *me* to

madness. Do you think I should believe it without proof?——”

“On the spur of anger and jealousy you *might*. I do not know, I cannot tell, but I could never think her capable of falsehood, or dishonour,” whispered Curly, his breath growing shorter, his eyes more dim, though even on his haggard cheek a flush just rose, wavered, and died out, as he went on: “The day she—she—rejected me I accused her of her love for you, and then she answered me as a woman would hardly have done if she had not cared for you very dearly. Before I left England I left all I had to her; it is little enough, but it will keep her from want. Let some one seek her out, even though she were sunk in the lowest shame, and see that they give her my money. It will save her from the vile abyss to which Castleton would leave her to sink down as she might—as she must. Promise me, De Vigne—or you, Chevasney—promise me, or I cannot die in peace.”

“No, no, *I* promise you.”

Hoarse and low as De Vigne’s voice was, Curly heard it, a look of gratitude came into the eyes once so bright and fearless, now so dim and dull.

“And if you find that she does love you, you will not reward her for her love as we have done too many?”

Whiter and whiter yet grew De Vigne’s face, as his hands clenched harder on the straw of Curly’s bed; it was some moments before he spoke:

“*I dare* not promise that. God help me!”

But his words fell on ears deaf at last to the harsh fret and bustle of the world; the faintness of that terrible last struggle of brain and body with the coming chill of death, had crept over poor Curly. Sudden shiverings seized him, the mind, vanquished at last, began to wander from earth—whither who can dare to say?—dark-blue

shadows deepened under his hollow eyes, the life in him still lingered, as though loth to leave the form so brief a space ago full of such beautiful youth, such gracious manhood. To watch it flickering, struggling, growing fainter and fainter, ebbing away so slowly, so surely, dying out painfully, reluctantly; and to know that it might all have been spared by the common care that at home would be given to a horse—to a dog! God knows, there are sights and thoughts in this world that might well turn men to fiends! He gave one sigh, one heavy sigh deep drawn, and turned upon his side: "My mother—Alma!" Those were the last words he uttered; then—all light died out of his eyes, and the life so young, so brave, so gallant, had fled away for ever.

De Vigne bent over the reeking straw that was now the funeral bier of as loyal a heart as ever spent itself in England's cause; and bitter tears, wrung from his proud eyes, fell on the cold brow, and the rigid features that never more would light up with the kind, fond, fearless smile of friendship, truth, and welcome.

"I loved him," he muttered. "God help me! Such is ever my fate! My mother—Alma—Curly—*all* lost; and no bullet will come to me!"

In his own arms De Vigne bore Curly out from the loathsome charnel-house, where the living had been entombed with the dead. We buried him with many another, as loyal and gallant as he, who had died on the slope of the Great Redan; and we gave him a soldier's gravestone; a plain white wood cross with his name and his regiment marked upon it, such as were planted thick, in those two long years, on the hills and valleys of the Crimea. God knows if it be there now, or if the Russian peasant have struck it down and levelled the little mound with his ploughshare and the hoofs of his heavy oxen.

We have left him in his distant grave. England, whom he remembered in his death-hour, has forgotten him long ere this. Like many another soldier lying in the green sierras of Spain, among the pathless jungle of the tropics, amidst the golden corn of Waterloo, and the white headstones upon Cathcart's Hill; the country for which he fell scarcely heard his name, and never heeded his fate. There he lies in his distant grave, the white and gleaming City he died to win stately and restored to all her ancient beauty; the waters of the Alma rolling through its vineyards as peacefully as though no streams of blood had ever mingled with its flow; the surge of the Euxine Sea beating slowly on the Crimean sands a requiem for the buried dead. There he lies in his distant grave; God requite England if ever she forget him, and those who braved his danger, found his death, and shared his grave.

CHAPTER XI.

How Inconstancy was Voted a Virtue.

THERE was a ball at the Tuileries; that stately palace which has seen so many dynasties and so many generations, from the polished Pairs de France gathered round the courtly and brilliant Bourbons, to the Maréchaux roturiers, with their strong swords and their broad accents, crowding about the Petit Caporal, taking camp tone into palace salons. There were at the Tuileries that night all the English élite, of course, in honour of the "alliance;" and there was among the other foreign guests one Prince Carl of Vallenstein-Seidlitz, an Austrian, with an infinitesimal duchy and a magnificent figure, a tall, strong fellow, with the blue eyes and fair hair of the Teuton race, a man of few words and only

two passions: the one for "belles tailles," the other for "gros jeu."

He had been exchanging a few monosyllables with the Empress, and now leant against the wall of one of the other reception-rooms, regarding, with calm admiration, the beauty of the Duchesse d'Albe, until his attention wandered to a new face that he had not seen before, and he turned to a young fellow belonging to the British Legation, and demanded who she was?"

Then he asked another question:

"Why have I never seen her?"

"Because she is in love with a married man who is in the Crimea, and but for my mother she would never go into society."

"Hein! A married man! Introduce her to me!"

Rushbrooke Molyneux introduced the Duke of Vallenstein-Seidlitz to his sister, and the bold Teuton eyes fastened on Violet with delight at that lovely form, whose grace and outline eclipsed all he had ever seen. I am not sure that a casual observer would have noticed any change in our brilliant belle. The eyes had lost their *riant* and cloudless regard; and the smile that had before been so spontaneous and so heartfelt, now faded off her lips the moment courtesy ceased to require it. Beyond that, there was little alteration. At her years the most bitter curse upon the mind does not stamp itself upon the features; moreover, she knew that she was pitied and that he was blamed, and that knowledge was sufficient to rouse her Irish spirit to face the world which would only have amused itself with her sorrow and taken occasion for fresh condemnation of him: so—she let the wolf gnaw at her vitals, but suffered no word of pain to escape which might be construed into a reproach to the absent,

Vollenstein looked on her *belle taille*, and on her proud face, never noticing the weary depths in the eyes that seemed "looking afar off," and the haughty chillness of tone into which Violet, surrounded with men who would willingly have taught her to forget, had unconsciously fallen in self-defence; but thought to himself, as he drove away to a less formal entertainment at the Café Anglais: "*Qui le diable est ce peste d'homme marié! N'importe! Je la ferai l'oublier.*" And Lady Molyneux thought, as her maid unfastened her diamond tiara: "If the cards are played well, I may make Violet Duchess of Vollenstein-Seidlitz. It would be the best match of the season. What a pity it seems Sabretasche has never had anything happen to him!—if he were not in that Crimea, alive, to write her letters and feed this romance, I could soon bring her to reason. However, as it is, a great deal may be done by firmness; if I could only persuade Violet how utterly unnecessary a *grande passion* is—indeed, in marriage, positively inconvenient! Her dresses mount up very expensively. I *must* have that lace—only three hundred guineas, dirt cheap! and I don't believe the women will let me have it unless I pay part of their bill, tiresome creatures. I paid them up every farthing seven years ago, but that sort of persons grows so rude now-a-days, instead of being thankful for one's custom, that it is utterly insufferable. I must certainly marry Violet to somebody, and I will not procrastinate about it any longer. I shall be firm with her!"

The Molyneux had come to winter in Paris. Coral-lyne, though it looked well enough in Burke, was utterly uninhabitable; London was out of the question till March, and the Viscountess, tired of travelling, and bored with the Bads, had taken a suite in an hotel in the Champs Elysées, where she contrived to spend her

days tolerably pleasantly, especially as there was a remarkably handsome Confessor, who gave her unusual piquancy in her religious excitements, and made her think seriously of the duties of auricular confession. (It is commonly said that women make the best devotees—doubtless for causes too lengthy to enter upon here—but I wonder, if religions had no priests how many of their fairer disciples would they retain?) And now, Lady Molyneux had another object in life—to woo Prince Carl for her daughter. Bent on that purpose, she tried to make the Hôtel Clâcy very delightful to him, and succeeded. Violet paid him no attention—barely as much as courtesy dictated to a man of his rank and to her father's guest—but he cared nothing for conversation, and as long as she sat there, however haughtily silent, and he could admire her *belle taille* as he liked, he wished for no words, though he might have desired a few smiles. Still she was the first woman who had neglected him, and to men as courted as the Austrian this is a better spur than any, and he really grew interested when he found it not so easy "*de la faire oublier.*"

"*C'est en bon train,*" thought my lady; "if only Violet were more tractable, and Sabretasche would not write!"—would not *live* was in her thoughts, but naturally so religiously-minded a woman could hardly "murder with a wish," and having no other weapons than her natural ones of tongue and thought, she planned out a series of ingenious persecutions against her daughter till she should have induced her to marry.

"My dear Violet, oblige me with a few minutes' conversation," said my lady, one morning.

Violet looked up and followed her passively; her manner was as soft and gentle as of old—even gentler still to those about her—but the chill of her great grief

was upon her, and her mother's persistence had taught her a somewhat haughty reserve, quite foreign to her nature, in defence not only of herself, but of the allegiance, which she never attempted to conceal, that she gave to him as faithfully as though he had been her husband.

"My dear Violet," began the Viscountess, seating herself opposite to her daughter in her own room, "may I ask whether you absolutely intend dedicating all your days to Vivian Sabretasche? Do you really mean to devote yourself to maidenhood all your life because one man happens not to be able to marry you?"

The colour rose on Violet's brow; the sensitive wound shrank at any touch; and my Lady Molyneux, religious and gentle woman though she was, could use Belgravian Billingsgate on occasion.

"Why do you renew that subject? You know as well as I, that I shall never marry. It is a subject which concerns no one but myself, and I have told you, once for all, that I hold myself as fully bound to him as if the vows we hoped to take had passed between us?"

Her voice trembled as she spoke, though her teeth were set together. The Viscountess sighed and sneered.

"Then do you mean that you will refuse Regalia?"

"I have refused him."

"You have!" And my lady, with a smile, drank a little eau-de-Cologne by way of refreshment after hearing such a statement. "I suppose you know, Violet, that you will have no money; that if you do not make a good match now you are young and pretty, nobody will take you when you are the dowerless *passée* daughter of a penniless Irish Peer? And Vollenstein-Seidlitz, may I inquire, if you have refused *him*, too?"

"He has not given me the opportunity; if he do, I shall."

"If he do, you will? You must be mad—absolutely mad!" cried her mother, too horrified for expression. "Don't you know that there is not a girl in the English or the French empire, who would not take such an offer as his, and accept it with thanksgiving?"

"Oh yes! I could not sell myself to better advantage!"

"Sell yourself?" repeated the peeress. Fine ladies are not often fond of hearing things called by their proper names.

"Yes, sell myself," repeated Violet, bitterly, leaning against the mantelpiece, with a painful smile upon her lips. "Would you not put me up to auction, knock me down to the highest bidder? Marriage is the mart, mothers the auctioneers, and he who bids the highest wins. Women are like racers, brought up only to run for Cups, and win handicaps for their owners."

"Nonsense!" said her mother, impatiently. "You have lost your senses, I think. There is no question of 'selling,' as you term it. Marriage is a social compact, of course, where alliances suitable in position, birth, and wealth, are studied. Why should you pretend to be wiser than all the rest of the world? Most amiable and excellent women have married without thinking love a necessary ingredient. Why should you object to a good alliance if it be a *mariage de convenance*?"

"Because I consider a *mariage de convenance* the most gross of all social falsehood! You prostitute the most sacred vows and outrage the closest ties; you carry a lie to your husband's heart and home. You marry him for his money or his rank, and simulate an attachment for him that you know to be hypocrisy. You stand before God's altar with an untruth upon your lips, and

either share an unhallowed barter, or deceive and trick an affection that loves and honours you. The Quadroon girl sold in the slave-market is not so utterly polluted, as the woman free, educated, and enlightened, who barter herself for a 'marriage for position.'"

Something of her old passionate eloquence was roused in her, as she spoke with contempt and bitterness. Her heart was sick of the follies and conventionalities which surrounded her, so meshing her in that it needed both spirit and endurance to keep free and true amidst them all. Lady Molyneux was silent for a minute, possibly in astonishment at this novel view of that usual desideratum—a marriage for position.

"My dear Violet, your views are very singular—very extraordinary. You are much too free of thought. If you had listened to me once before, you would never have had the misery of your present unhappy infatuation. The eye of society is upon you; you must act with dignity; society demands it of you. You must not disgrace your family by pining after a married man. It was very sad, I know—very sad that affair; and I dare say you were very attached to him. Everybody knows he was a most handsome, gifted, fascinating creature, though, alas! utterly unprincipled. Still, I think your first feeling should have been one of intense thankfulness at being preserved from the fate you might have had. Only fancy if his wife had not declared her claims before your marriage with him! Only fancy, what your position in society would have been! Every one would have pitied you, of course, but not a creature could have visited you?"

The silent scorn in her daughter's eyes made her pause; she could not but read the contempt of her own

doctrines in them, which Violet felt too deeply to put into words.

"I have no doubt it was a very great trial," she continued hurriedly; "I am not denying that, of course; still, what I mean is, that your duty, your moral duty, Violet, was, as soon as you found that Vivian Sabretasche was the husband of another, to do your very utmost to forget him, certainly not to foster and cherish his memory as persistently and wilfully as you do. It is an entire twelvemonth since you parted from him, and yet, instead of trying to banish all remembrance of your unhappy engagement and breaking entirely with him, you keep up a correspondence with him—more foolish your father to allow it!—and obstinately refuse to form a more fortunate attachment, and marry well. I tell you that your affection, however legitimate its commencement, became wrong, *morally wrong*, as soon as you learned that he was married to another woman."

At last the Viscountess paused for breath; the scorn which had been gathering deeper and deeper in Violet's face burst into words; she lifted her head, that her mother might not see the thick blinding tears that gathered in her eyes:

"A sin? You cannot mean what you say! The sin, if you like, were indeed to forsake him and forget him; *that* were a crime, of which, if I were capable, you would indeed have reason to blush for me. When I knew him, worthy of every sacrifice that any woman could make him, so true and generous that he chose misery for himself rather than falsehood towards me, am I then to turn round and say to him, 'Because you cannot marry me—in other words, contribute to my own aggrandisement, and flatter my own self-love, I choose to forget all that has passed between us, to ignore all

the fidelity I once vowed to you, and sell whatever charms I have to some buyer free to bid a better price for them?"

The satiric bitterness in her tone stung her mother into shame, or as faint an approach to it as she could feel, and, like most people, she covered an indefensible argument with vague irritation.

"Really, Violet, your tone is highly unbecoming: I have absolutely no patience with your folly——!"

Violet stopped her with a gesture as of physical suffering, but with a dignity in her face that awed even her mother into silence.

"Not even you shall ever apply such a term to any devotion I can show to him. He is worthy all the love of a woman far nobler and better than I ever shall be. I promised him my allegiance once when the world smiled upon our love; because the world now frowns instead, do you suppose that I shall withdraw it? Do not torture me any more with this cruel discussion; it is ended once for all. I shall *never* marry; it will always be as useless to urge me as it is useless now. God knows whether we may ever meet again; but, living or dead, I am for ever bound to him."

Every vestige of colour fled from her face as she spoke; her fingers were clasped together till her rings cut into the skin; and there was that in her voice, which might have touched into sympathy, even the coldest nature. But (I do not think one can blame my Lady Molyneux; if she was born without feelings, perhaps she was hardly more responsible for the non-possession of them, than the idiot for the total absence of brain) her mother was not even silenced.

"Is that your final decision?" she said, with a sneer. "Very well, then! I will tell Vallenstein that my daughter

intends to lead a semi-conventual life, with the celibacy, but not the holy purpose, of a nun, because she is dying for a handsome *roué* who happens to be a married man. I dare say he will enjoy telling the story at the Tuileries; and there are plenty of women, my love, who will like nothing better than a laugh against *you*."

"You can say what you please," answered Violet, between her teeth.

But that she was her mother, the Viscountess would have had a far sharper retort.

"Of course I can! And stories grow strangely in passing from mouth to mouth! Dear me, is it three o'clock? And I was to be at Notre-Dame by half-past, to hear that divine creature, Alexis Dupont!" And my lady floated out of the room, while her daughter leant her head upon the mantelpiece, the tears she had forced back while in her mother's presence falling hot and thick on the chill marble—not more chill than the natures that surrounded her in the gay world of which she was weary. Her heart was sick within her, the burden of her life grew heavier than she knew how to bear.

How long she stood there she did not know, till hands as soft as her own touched hers, a face as fair as her own was lifted to hers, a voice whispered, "Why are you in pain? For you, of all, life should be bright and beautiful!"

Violet Molyneux stooped and touched with her lips the brow that had once flushed beneath De Vigne's caresses.

"Alma, tell me, what do *you* call fidelity?"

"Fidelity?" repeated Alma, with that instantaneous flash of responsive feeling on her mobile features which it had been De Vigne's pleasure to summon up and watch at his will. "There is little of it in the world, I

fancy. A marriage is to me null and void without fidelity, not only of act, but of thought, of mind, of heart; and fidelity makes in God's sight a marriage tie holier than any man can forge, and one which no human laws can sever. What do I call fidelity? I think it is to keep faithful through good report and evil report, through suffering, and, if need be, through shame; it is to credit no evil of the one loved from other lips, and if told that such evil is true by his own, to blot it out as though it never had been; to keep true to him through all appearance, however against him, through silence, and absence, and trial; never to forsake him even by one thought, and to brave all the world to serve him; that is what seems fidelity to me,—nothing less—nothing less!"

Her eyes flashed, her lips quivered. A tender love, an undying sorrow, were spoken on her face, as, turned full to Violet, the sunlight fell upon it.

Violet looked at her and sighed; she was too unselfish not to regret, even amidst her own sorrow, that another should share a similar fate; and she felt little doubt either that De Vigne cared nothing for his former protégée, or that he had left her, with his love spoken but his marriage told. She liked the depth of feeling and delicacy of nature which had made Alma hold her attachment to him too sacredly to speak of it, and hear his name, when it was occasionally mentioned in the Molyneux circle, without betraying "the secret wound beneath the cloak," loving the hand that had given that wound too well to murmur to others at its pain. The similarity of their fate touched her. She stooped over Alma and passed her hand over the golden hair that De Vigne had drawn through his fingers—those shining silken threads that had held him closer than chains of iron.

"You are right! . We must give 'nothing less.'"

This was all that passed between them, then or afterwards on what lay nearest to the hearts of both, yet that little was enough to awake a close sympathy between them, none the less real because it was silent. To Alma life was very bitter now. Twelve months had passed, and she was still as far from De Vigne as when she lay chained to her sick-bed. The letter she had written at Montessor's had miscarried; De Vigne had never had it. Hearing nothing from him, she had written again—a letter which would have touched a heart far harder and more steeled against her than his. That letter she received back, sealed again, and directed to her in a writing which she knew but too well, firmly, boldly, with not a trace allowed to appear in the clear caligraphy of the agony in which the words were penned. She knew *then* that he believed her false to him; that the circumstantial evidence which had told so strongly against her had crushed out all faith and trust and tenderness in his heart towards her. It was the most cruel wound Alma had ever had, to find herself so readily doubted, so harshly given up, so unjustly denied even a hearing. Injustice was always very bitter to her; it roused all that was dark and fiery in her character. From anybody else she would never have forgotten or pardoned it; certainly never have stooped to clear herself from it. De Vigne she forgave, and thought less of her own wrong than of all she knew that he endured.

Alma, with all her impulsiveness and expansiveness, was sensitive to all touch of those more delicate feelings that she sheltered in her heart; over them she was haughty, proud, reserved. She had, moreover, great self-control. De Vigne's name was too dear to her to be breathed before others. She had resided twelve months with the

Molyneux; and they never knew, though he was often mentioned casually, that his name merely spoken by another's voice struck like steel to her heart.

Alma's principles of honour and of trust were far more acute and refined than those of most people; the love De Vigne had lavished on her was sacred to her; a treasure reposed in her alone, not to be spread out before other eyes. Violet,—the only one who would have translated the dilated terror of her eyes when the morning papers came in, the anguish of her face when she bent over the Returns of killed and wounded, the gleam of her eyes whenever De Vigne's name was mentioned by any man who had come back from the Crimea from ill-health or to bring despatches,—Violet was too absorbed in her own thoughts to notice what passed beside her, or at least to reflect upon it. She was kind to her, as she would have been to any one in a subordinate situation; still more so one, to whom she had always had a certain attraction, ever since she had heard of her as the artist of the Louis Dix-Sept. But, until the moment when Alma's definition of fidelity unwittingly betrayed her, Violet had noticed her but little, and never discovered her secret.

It was a peculiar position that Alma occupied in the Molyneux household in Paris. The Hon. Rushbrooke, admiring her *chevelure dorée*, had thought he could make much the same love to her as to his mother's maid, whenever that soubrette chanced to be a pretty one; and Lady Molyneux had scarcely ever spoken to her, save when, struck with her great taste in dress, she would fain have had her turned into a sort of *chef de toilette*. But Jockey Jack vowed she was as much of a lady as any of them; swore he'd known Tressillian in early days; by George, he *would* have them civil to the little girl, and was civil to

her himself, in his bluff, blunt, kindly-meant way; and Violet, won towards her as months passed on, sought refuge in her society from the inanities, frivolities, scandals, and manœuvres constantly poured into her ears by her mother, and from the whirl of a circle whose gaieties were now so foreign to her, until a tacit sympathy and a sincere regard grew up between them—the friendless artiste and the fashionable aristocrate.

CHAPTER XII.

The Tortures of Tantalus.

It was Christmas night—Christmas-eve—and the midnight mass was rising and falling in its solemn chant through the long aisles of Notre Dame. The incense floated upwards to the dim vaulted roof, the starry lights glittered on the gorgeous high altar, while the sweet swell of the cathedral choir rose on the still, hushed air, as through Paris, under the winter stars, there tolled one by one the twelve strokes of the midnight hour.

Midnight mass in Notre Dame!—it were hard to hear it bursting in its glorious harmony, after the dead silence of the assembled multitude, once from priest and people, choir and altar, without something of that sadness and that veneration which lie in most of us, though too often lost and silenced in the fret and hurry of our life.

One by one the midnight strokes tolled slowly out upon the Christmas air; hushed as though no human heart beat amongst them, the gathered thousands knelt in prayer; the last stroke fell and lingered on their ears, and then, over their bowed heads, rolled the rich cadence of the choir and the full swell of the organ-notes. Among the multitude knelt Violet Molyneux and Alma, their thoughts far from creeds or formularies, from religious

differences or religious credulities, but their hearts bowed in prayer for those far distant. What was to them church, place, creed? thus they prayed in the solitude of their own chambers; thus they would have prayed beside the sick-beds of Scutari; thus they now prayed in the hushed aisles of Notre Dame, where, if forms differed, human hearts at least beat beside them and around with hopes, fears, griefs, passions, pleading for mercy, as in theirs!

As they passed out of the great door to the carriage, in the frosty starlit night, both started, and a voice whispered by their side:

"Per Carità! date la limosina per amor del Figlio di Dio!"

They scarcely saw the beggar's face, coming out of the gas glare into the moonlit night, but they heard the voice, broken, almost fierce—perhaps with hunger!—in its supplication, and both instinctively, and contrary to the custom of either, stretched out their hands with an alms on Christmas-eve. As it chanced, Alma was the nearer to the suppliant, who caught her offered gift, but did not see Violet's. The crowd following, pushed them on; and their carriage rolled away, while the woman, with Alma's coin in her hand, looked after them with a strange expression on her haggard face, partly curiosity, partly hate, partly fear, yet with a tinge of regret and pain, as she muttered in Tuscan:

"Santa Maria! questo sorriso mi fa pensare di gli! E presagio della morte—ma—per chi?"

The wild gaze of the Italian's fierce dark eyes, the haunting tone of that shrill "Carità! Carità!" still lingered in Alma's mind as she rolled through the gay gas-lighted streets of Paris; and her young eyes closed with a despairing sigh, and a sickening shudder of dread, at this mys-

terious Human Life, which is so short in years, so long in suffering.

The Paris winter passed; passed as Paris winters ever do, with a gay whirl of glittering life for the rich, with cold, and hunger, and suffering for the poor; the gas flowers of Mabile, burning at the same hour, with the candle that gleamed its sickly light on the dead bodies at the Morgue. The Paris winter passed, and Violet Molyneux was still the empress of its soirées; that chill hauteur which in self-defence she had assumed, was no barrier between her and the love that was pressed upon her from all quarters and highest ranks, evident though it was by her equable coldness to all, that her exquisite loveliness would never be given to any. In February, Lord Molyneux received a letter with the stately royal seal of the Vallenstein-Seidlitz, requesting the honour of his daughter's hand. It came to him when they were at dinner; even with the length of the table between them, his wife knew, or thought she knew, the armorial bearings of the seal, as it lay upwards unopened, and congratulated herself, though with a rapid cast forwards as to how many hundreds the trousseau would cost; but the trousseau would be one final expense, and Violet's dress in the present state of things was an annual destruction of what without her my lady would have had for her own silks and laces, jewellery and point. As they took their coffee, preparatory to going to a ball at the British Embassy, Jockey Jack broke the seal, perused the missive, and in silence handed it to his daughter. Violet read it, with pain, for she foresaw that she should not be allowed to reject this, as she had done others, without contention and upbraiding; and gave it back to

him as silently, but the thin, jewelled hand of her mother intercepted it, with a snappish sneer:

"Is your own wife, Lord Molyneux, to be excluded from all your confidences with your daughter?"

"What answer, Vy?" asked Jockey Jack, turning a deaf ear to his lady, who had a knack of bringing forward her relationship to him on any disagreeable occasion, such as opening his notes or referring her creditors to him, but on all others ignored it very completely.

"The same as usual, papa," answered Violet, bending down to him.

Lady Molyneux read Vallenstein's formal and courtly letter with calm deliberation through her gold eye-glass; and Alma rose and left the room, guessing, with intuitive tact and delicacy of perception, that this was some matter which they would prefer to discuss alone. Lady Molyneux read the letter, then folded it up and put it in its envelope.

"Violet, would it be too much for me to ask to be allowed to share the confidence you gave your papa just now? Might I inquire what reply you send to Vallenstein?"

Violet gave one sigh of inexpressible weariness; she was so tired of this ceaseless contention, the continual dropping of water on a stone; this jangling and upbraiding; the martyrdom of daily petty badgering and polished vituperation.

"Certainly you may, mamma. I thank Prince Carl for the honour he has done me; and I reject his offer with all the gratitude for his generosity that it merits."

Lady Molyneux shrugged her shoulders, and did not condescend to answer her. She turned to her husband,

who was beating an impatient tattoo on the back of his couch.

"My dear Molyneux, do *you* intend, too, to refuse Prince Carl's proposals?"

Jockey Jack looked up with a curse on women's tongues, and on their tomfoolery of marriage and giving in marriage, ready to dissent from his wife at a moment's notice.

"Vollenstein does not propose for *me*, my dear. I have nothing to do with it, except to tell him, as decently as I can, that Vy is very much obliged to him, but would rather be excused."

"Then you mean to countenance her in her folly?"

"I don't know what you mean by countenancing her; she is old enough to judge for herself, especially about her own husband. I dare say a royal marriage would have had great attractions for you, Helena, but if your daughter thinks differently there is no reason for you to quarrel about it," said Jockey Jack, who did not see why one man was not as good as another to Violet, nor yet, if they were not, why she should be bullied about it.

"I see one if you do not," said his wife, frigidly. "It is of the greatest importance that she should marry soon and marry well. The singularly unfortunate circumstances that attended her lamentable engagement—an engagement that would never have been entered into if I had been listened to—have laid her open to a great deal of remark, never beneficial to any woman——"

"Do you speak feelingly?" interrupted Lord Molyneux, *sotto voce*.

"Indeed, very prejudicial," continued his wife, imperturbably. "Violet has now been out three years; girls that were *débutantes* with her have settled well long

ago. Beatrice Carteret, with not a tithe of her advantages, married the Duke of St. Orme in her first season; and that remarkably ordinary little Selina Albany drew Whitebait into a proposal, and he settled a hundred thousand upon her for pin-money——”

“That’ll do, that’ll do,” cut in Molyneux, impatiently. “St. Orme is an old brute, who bullied his first wife into consumption, and as for Whitebait, he’s a young fool, whom his uncle tried to get shut up for idiotcy; if Vy can’t do better than that, I would rather she lived and died a Molyneux. If you’ve no better arguments for marriage, Helena——”

“At all events,” said my lady, with her nastiest sneer, “they would either of them make as good husbands as your favourite would have done with a wife *in petto*! She has been immensely admired; she has made more conquests, I have no doubt, than any woman of her years; but men will not go and recount their own rejections; other ladies will not believe me when I tell them whom she might have married—very naturally, too—and all the world knows of her is her devotion to a married man! I leave it to her own sense to determine, whether that is a very advantageous report to cling to her in circles, where women dislike her as their rival, and men whom she has rejected are not very likely to be over-merciful in their terms of speaking of her. Of course it is all hushed when I draw near, but I have overheard more than one remark very detrimental to her. In a little time men will become very shy of making one their wife, whose name has been so long in connexion with a married man’s, and whose ridiculous *dévouement* to Colonel Sabretasche has been the most amusing theme in salons where he has been so famous for love not quite so constant! Therefore, I say it is

most important she should marry soon, and marry well; and to reject such proposals as Prince Carl's would be madness—a man who could wed, if he chose, with one of the royal houses of Europe! A letter of refusal shall never be sent to Vallenstein."

"Ah! well, I'm sure I don't know," said poor Jockey Jack, bewildered with this lengthened lecture. "Come, Vy, your mamma speaks reasonably—for once! You know I am very much attached to Sabretasche—very much—and I admit you don't see any other man so handsome or so accomplished, and all that sort of thing; and he was deuced mad about you, poor fellow! But then, you see, as long as there's that confounded wife of his in the way, and her life's just as good as his, he can't marry you, with our devilish laws; and, ten to one if ever the time come that he can, he won't care a straw about you—that's very much the way with us men—and you'll have wasted all your youth and your beauty for nothing, my poor pet! You see, we are not rich, and if you were well married—it's most women's ambition, at the least! Come, Vy, what do you say?"

Violet rose and leaned against the console, with her head erect, her little pearly teeth set tight, her lips closed in a haughty, scornful curve over them, her face very pale—pale, but resolute as Eponina's or Gertrude von der Wart's—and I think the martyrdom of endurance is worse than the martyrdom of action!

"I say what I am weary of saying—that it is useless, and will ever be useless, to urge me to the sin of infidelity, which you raise into a virtue because it is expedient! Let me alone!—it is all I ask. I go into society because you desire it; it is hard that you will persecute me on the one subject which is the most painful of all. Let me alone!—what I may suffer, I

never intrude upon you. If you wish to be free from me—if I cost you anything you grudge—only allow me to work for myself—to go into the world, where for your sake I am not known, and, under another name, gain money for myself; I have often been told my voice would bring me more wealth than I should need. Only give me permission, I will never complain; but consent to be given over to Vollenstein, or any other man, I will not! To be sold by you to the highest bidder—to be forced into a union I should loathe—to be compelled to a marriage that would be infidelity to both! I know what you mean: an unwedded daughter is an expense, and, as society counts, somewhat a discredit. If you feel it so, I am willing to support myself; if you allowed it, I should find no shame in that; but, once for all, I *swear*, that unless God will that I should ever marry him whom I love and honour, I will be no man's wife. If you care nothing for my peace, if you will not listen to my prayers, if you will not pity me in my trial—at least, you will not seek to make me break my oath!"

Jockey Jack rose from his seat, and left the room; he felt it was his duty to upbraid her for her folly; but he had not the heart to do it, and—true Briton!—left the room, ashamed of the emotion which showed that all good and generous things were not wholly dead within him.

At the ball at the English Embassy that night all beauty paled before hers; men looking on it would have given ten years of their lives to win one smile from those lovely eyes, to have made one blush glow on that pure, colourless cheek; young, unnoticed débutantes looked at her as she passed them, with that crowd gathered round her which everywhere lingered on her step, and wished, with all the envy of women and all

the fervour of their years, that they were she—the belle of Paris—in whose praise there was not one dissentient voice, in whom the most fastidious and hypercritical could not find a flaw. If they had seen the reverse picture, the Queen of Society without that crown which was so weary a weight upon her aching brows—if they had seen her that night, the flowers off her luxuriant hair, the glittering jewels off her arms, kneeling there by her bedside in solitude, which no human eyes profaned, they would have paused before they envied Violet Molyneux, courted, followed, worshipped though she was. If the world went home with most of us, I fear it would have sadder stories to tell than the *cancans* and the *grivois* tales in which its heart delights; the lips that sing our gayest barcarolles in society, often have barely strength enough to murmur a broken prayer in the solitude of their lonely hours, when the mask is off and the green curtain is down!

It was the beginning of April; the chesnuts of the Tuileries were just thrusting out their first green buds, bringing to Alma's thoughts those chesnut-boughs at her old nurse's home, under whose leafy shadows in the sunshine of two summers past she had drunk of that fatal intoxication, whose delirium is more rapturous, and whose awakening more bitter, than the dreams of the opium-eater. Meanwhile for one end she had worked unwearingly. Violet had introduced her talent into notice among the dilettanti of Paris. Many were ready to admire anything that would win them favour with the English beauty; others really saw, and were struck with, the wonderful dash and vitality in the outlines, the delicacy and brilliance of the colouring; orders in plenty were given her, more than she could have completed in a dozen years, and Alma excluded herself from the

society into which her own genius and Violet's patronage would have introduced her, that she might work, with her art and her hands, and her rich glowing imagination, till she had money to take her to the Crimea to win him back, or die. Poor child! how few "win back" all that makes their life's glory, whatever stake it be; yet we live—live to the full age of human life. When we woo death he comes not; when we bar the chamber-door, then he enters with his chill breath and stealthy step.

Her hoard was completed. Never did miser gaze on his treasure, never wife on her husband's ransom, never captive on the warrant of his freedom, never author on the darlings of his brain, with fonder rapture, with more grateful joy, than Alma on the money won by her own hands, which was to bear her to her lover. The thousand miles seemed now but as a span; love would cross all the lands, bridge all the seas, that parted her from him! She would go to him, she would find him; she would risk all to see him once again, to kneel at his feet, to swear to him she was his, and his alone; to force him to believe her!

Alma looked at her precious gold that was to take her to his side, that was to bring him back to her; gold won by the head and hand for the service of the heart that was chained down, its high thoughts clogged, its beating wings fettered, its spirit bruised, but never beaten, by the curse of—want of money. It was won; the modern god without whose aid human life may struggle and fall and rise again, and again struggle and again fall, and go down at the last in the unequal fight of right against might, talent against wealth, honesty against expediency, for all the world may care. It was won; and not an hour longer should any human force keep her

from that distant goal whither for twenty weary months her heart had turned so constantly. She locked her money in a secret drawer (she—generous as the winds—had grown as careful of that treasure as any hoarding Dives!), and left her room to seek Violet Molyneux, and tell her she must leave her. It was impossible for her not to be grateful to Violet for the generous delicacy, the tact, the kindness with which she smoothed away all that her mother would have made painful in the position of any employée; and Violet grew fond of her, as all who knew the Little Tressillian were wont to do, even despite themselves, won by her winning, impulsive, graceful ways,—natural to her as its songs to a bird, its vivacity to a kitten, its play in the evening wind to a flower.

She sat down in the inner drawing-room. She did not see Violet, and supposed her to be in her own boudoir, where the belle of Paris spent each day until two, denied to all, often in penning those letters, which were her lover's only solace through the long Crimean nights.

Suddenly, however, she heard Rushbrooke Molyneux's voice in the outer room.

"Vy, am I a good shot?" he was saying.

"You know you are," answered his sister's voice; she was probably surprised at so irrelevant a question.

"Very well; then if you won't marry Vallenstein—the Dashers, you see, are coming home, and as soon as Colonel Sabretasche is in England I shall challenge him, he will meet me, and I shall shoot him here—just here, Vy—where life ceases instantaneously."

A low cry of horror burst from his sister's lips. Alma involuntarily rose and looked into the room; she saw that Violet had started from her brother's side, her

face blanched with amazement, and her eyes fastened on him with the fascination and the loathing with which a bird gazes up into a snake's green fiery eyes.

"Great Heaven! you would do murder?"

"Murder! What an idea! Duelling is legitimate, in this country at least; and I dare say your lover will find his way to Paris, though he is such a 'man of honour.' Listen to me, Vy; seriously, you must be mad to be taking the veil, as it were, for a fellow who can't marry you—for the best of all reasons, that he is another woman's husband. It's the greatest tomfoolery one ever heard. Why shouldn't you do like any other girl—send this bosh of romance to the deuce and settle well. Any woman going would be wild to have a chance of winning Vollenstein. He's an out-and-out better match than we could have looked for; and he'll be very facile, Violet; he will be an easy husband after a little time, and you can invite Sabretasche to your Court——"

"God help me! if my brother tempt me to double dishonour!"

The words broke from her almost unconsciously. She deigned no answer to him, but stood looking at him with such loathing and contempt, that Rushbrooke Molyneux, though he was far gone in shamelessness, shrank before it.

But like many such natures, coward at heart, he could bully a woman.

"Well, will you marry Prince Carl, or not?"

"I have told you once for all—*no*."

Violet stood, her head just turned over her shoulder to him as she was about to leave the room; her calm, resolute, contemptuous tone stung him into irritation; and Rushbrooke had set his heart on his sister's becoming Vollenstein's wife, for certain pecuniary reasons of his

own, having lost very heavily to the Prince at the French Derby, and over Baccarat.

"You are quite determined? Then I shoot Sabretasche dead four-and-twenty hours after I see him next. Come, Vy, choose: the wedding-ring for yourself, or the grave for your lover?"

He meant what he said—for the time at least; and Violet knew he was quite capable of doing all he said, and more, if he threatened it. Her love subdued her pride; in the frenzy of the moment she turned back and caught both her brother's hands:

"Rushbrooke! are you utterly merciless—utterly brutal? Not to save my own life would I kneel to you; but to save his I would stoop lower, were it possible! I know that he would choose murder from you, rather than infidelity from me. If you take his life, you take mine; my existence is bound with his—you will scarcely brand yourself a fratricide?"

"Splendid acting, Vy," said her brother, coldly. "You always did act well, though; you played in the Belvoir theatricals when you were only ten, I remember. Come, think better of it; marry Vallenstein, and your idol is safe from me. If you boast your love is so great, you might surely save the man's life?"

"God help me!" moaned Violet.

"Will you marry Prince Carl?"

"No!"

"You will 'murder' Vivian Sabretasche then, as you term it?"

Another cry burst from Violet's lips, forced out as from a woman on the rack of the Star Chamber or the Inquisition. Then she lifted her eyes to him, with deep dark circles under them, her face full of unutterable anguish, but with a strange nobility upon it.

"I would rather leave him in God's hands than yours. HE will protect him from you! I have told you, I will never break my faith to him!"

"Very well! I will go and have a look at my pistols," smiled her brother, as he rose.

But Violet's courage gave way, she fell heavily forwards on a couch.

"My beloved! my beloved! God knows I would give my life for yours, but they shall never make me false to you! You would not wish it—you would not wish it, darling,—not to save your life——"

Alma could stay no longer; with one bound, like a young panther, she was in the room and kneeling beside Violet, while she turned her beaming, flashing eyes, full of their azure fire, upon Violet's brother.

"She gave you your right title. Fratricide! You are more than that, you are a brute, and were I of your own sex, I would make you feel it, boasted duellist, or rather murderer, though you be. What is your sister's marriage to you, that you should seek to force her into a union that she loathes? Prince Carl himself would cry shame on you. Go, go, and never come near your sister till you come to ask her pardon for your inhuman words and dastard act."

With all her old passion, Alma spoke, like a little Pythoness in her wrath; every one of her words brought a flush of shame to his cheek, and he forgot that it was his mother's dependent whom he should have cowed with a word and threatened with dismissal.

He left the room, murmuring something of Vallenstein, his friend—devotedly attached—Violet's unfortunate attachment—only meant to frighten her, of course—nothing more—nothing more. Then he backed out;

and Violet lifted her face with a painful tremulousness on the lips.

"Alma, I have not forgotten your definition of fidelity!"

The smile with which she spoke struck to her listener's heart; and she looked up at her with an answering regard, that seemed to Violet like an angel promise, and prophecy, for the future:

"To those who are thus faithful reward will come!"

Violet tried to smile again, but her lips quivered in the effort, and she rose and left the room; while Alma, seizing the paper that Rushbrooke had flung down, tore it apart with breathless haste, remembering his words, "The Dashers are coming home."

De Vigne had been much altered since Curly's death. Curly's words had let in one ray of hope, and he cursed the headlong impetuosity which had made him send her letter back unopened. There was hope, and sometimes De Vigne strove with all his force to shut it out, lest it should break in and fool him once again; at others he clung to it as men do to the only chance that makes their life of value. Heaven knows that if his love for Alma had been error, it brought him punishment enough. Whichever way it turned, he saw enough to madden him. If she were false to him, his life would be one long and bitter curse; if he had judged her too harshly, and his neglect and cruelty had driven her to desperation, and sent her, young, unprotected, attractive as she was to men, into the chill world to battle with poverty, he shuddered to think what might have been her fate, so delicate, so trusting, so easily misunderstood; if she were true to him, across the heaven that opened to him with that hope, there stretched the dark memory of the woman who bore his name.

His love for her had changed as near to hate as his nature, generous and inherently forgiving, would allow. He had loved her, but with the love that slew Desdemona, that murdered Mariamne; a love that would have perilled all for one caress of hers, but would have sent her to her grave rather than have seen a rival's hand touch her, another's lips come near her; a love inexorable as death, that must have all, or nothing.

But in those long winter nights, tossing on his camp bed, Curly's words, like voices from the grave, recurred ceaselessly to him, and as a burst of tears—anguish in itself—yet relieves the still worse suffering of the brain, so gentler thoughts of Alma, a ray of hope, a gleam of trust, softened and relieved the bitter despair and hopeless agony of the past months. Was his own past so pure, his own life so perfect, that he had any right to cast a stone at her, even, though her error and her perfidy had blasted all his peace? De Vigne remembered, with a pang, how Sabretasche had said to him, "Let him that standeth take heed lest he fall," and how he had retorted, in the pride of his unassailed strength, that to win a young girl's love, bound and fettered as he was, would be a blackguard's act; yet his honour had gone down before his passion, and he had forgotten the ties that bound him, until, had she been true to him, it would have been useless to remember them.

If she had been false to him, if she had been Vane Castleton's toy for the hour and the plaything of others since, he would try to find her, save her, shield her from her fate, even though to find her, and to leave her so, broke his own heart. If she had been true to him, and others had wronged her youth and her guilelessness, he would drag her from their clutches; and no matter into what depths of misery she had sunk, he would raise her

up, avenge her, and if ever his name became his own again, give it, with his love and honour, to her in the sight of men. Across the darker passions of his soul gleamed the Pity and the Pardon he had once had need to ask of her. His love grew gentler, nobler, tenderer; and he thought, amidst the anguish of those still night-watches, "Who am I, to sit in judgment on her or any other?"

De Vigne had at last learnt a lesson that he had never learned before in all his life—he had learnt to love not only *for himself*, but more purely, more holily, more unselfishly.

But at Constantinople—he whom all the army called by his Indian sobriquet of the Charmed Life, whom shot and shell, death and danger, had alike spared; who had ridden unharmed out of the fatal mêlée before the guns of Balaklava, though the last to leave those doomed and death-haunted lines;—at Constantinople De Vigne was chained on a sick-bed by the bitterest of all our Crimean foes—the cholera. It was touch and go with him; his life was very nearly added to those ghastly Returns, which witnessed how much human life was lost out there by mismanagement and procrastination. Thank God, the strength of his constitution pulled him through at last, but the Dashers sailed for England without him. I got leave to stay with him. I would have been cashiered rather than leave him alone in the Scutari sick-wards in that pestilential place, which sounds so poetic and delicious with its long, lovely name, its Golden Horn, its glistening Bosphorus, its gleaming minarets, its Leilas, its Dudus, its bulbuls, and its beauty; but is, as all of us can witness, a very abomination for a sick man to dwell in, with its dirt, its fleas, its mosquitoes, its jabbering crowds chattering every lingo, its abominable little Turks

with their eternal "Bono Johnny," and its air rife with disease, malaria, and filth.

Sabretasche offered willingly to stay too.

"No, no; go to England, Sabretasche," said De Vigne, signing the Colonel down towards him in one of his intervals of comparative ease. "Before long I hope to follow you, and you would do me much more service if you would—if you could—without bringing her name forward at all, learn something for me of——"

He stopped; he could not speak her name without a sharp spasm as of severe physical pain.

Sabretasche bent his head till his lips were close to De Vigne's ear; it was the first time he had heard him allude to her throughout the campaign.

"Of Alma Tressillian?" he said, softly.

De Vigne signed him assent, and a silent pressure of his hand was bond enough between them. If Sabretasche had been like some eminent Christians of my acquaintance, he might have taken the occasion to exalt his own superior foresight in prophesying the trouble that would be born from De Vigne's careless intimacy with the Little Tressillian; being nothing more than a "bon camarade," with a generous mind, a kind heart, and a gentleman's tact, he felt no temptation to do anything of the kind.

Some three weeks after Ours had got under weigh for England, I was sitting by De Vigne's couch reading to him from some of the periodicals my mother had sent me. It was Hamley of the Artillery's "Lady Lee," which ought to interest anybody if a novel ever can; but I doubt if De Vigne heard a word of it. He lay in one position; his head turned away from me, his eyes fixed on the light rosy eastern clouds, his right hand clenched hard upon the bed-clothes as though it would

lift him perforce from that cruel inaction, as it had aided him so many times in life. I was glad that at that minute an old Indian comrade of his—come en route from Calcutta to England via Constantinople to have a look at the seat of war—was shown into his room; hoping that courtesy might rouse him more than Hamley's lively story had power to do.

The man was a major in the Cavalry (Queen's—ça va sans dire), of the name of De Vine—a resemblance near enough, I dare say, to justify Mrs. Malaprop and Co. in thinking them brothers, and the Heralds' Office in making them out two branches of the same house.

He sat and chatted some time of their old Scinde reminiscences; heartily sorry to see De Vigne knocked down as he was, and congratulating him warmly on the honours he had won—honours for which, in truth, though De Vigne cared very little, as long as he had had the delight of fighting well, and was thought to "have done his duty."

At last the man rose to go, and had bidden us good-bye, when he turned back:

"I say, old fellow, I've forgotten the chief thing I came here to tell you. This letter of yours has been voyaging after me, sent from Calcutta to Delhi, and from Delhi to Rohilcunde, and God knows where, till it came to my hand about four months ago. I was just going to open it when I saw the *g* in the name, and the "Crimea," which the donkeys at the Post-office overlooked. You see your correspondent has put you Hus-sars, I suppose that led to the mistake. It's a lady's writing: I hope the delay's been no damage to your fair friend, whoever she be. I dare say you have 'em by scores from a dozen different quarters, so this one has been no loss. By George! it's seven o'clock, and I'm to

dine at the embassy. Good night, old fellow; I shall come and see you to-morrow."

Scrawled over with the different postscripts and addresses, so that nothing of the original address was visible save the "Major de Vigne," Alma's writing was recognised by him ere it had left the other's hand; almost before the door had closed he wrenched it open, and turning away from me, read the many close-written and tear-blotted pages that she had penned to him on her sick-bed at Montessor's. Knowing he would wish to read on unwitnessed, I left the room.

He did read on, and, when he had read all, bowing his head upon his hands, he wept like a woman. For in that hour of joy just won, for which his heart went up to God in trembling gratitude—between him, and the love that was his heritage and right as man, there stood the dark shadow, the relentless phantom of his Marriage. It is bitter, Heaven knows, to be alone in the Shadow of Death, with no ray of light to guide, no gleam of hope to aid us; but even more bitter than this is it to stand as he now stood, with the sudden gleam and radiance of a sunshine that he must never enjoy playing even at his very feet;—to stand as he now stood, fettered by irons that long ago his own hands had forged; held back by the Eumenides of his own headlong follies; divided from all he loved as by a great gulf, by the fell consequences of the Past; his own passions their own Nemesis.

Would you know the poison that stung him in the cup of his joy? It was this single passage: "She told me she was your wife, Granville!—*your wife!*—that coarse, loud-voiced, cruel-eyed woman! But that at the moment I hated her so bitterly for her assumption, I could have laughed in her face! I could not help telling

her it was a pity she did not learn the semblance of a lady to support her in her rôle; for I hated her so much for daring, even in pretence, to take your name—to venture to claim *you*. If it was wrong, I could not help it: I love you so dearly that I could never bear even an imaginary rival. That woman your wife! Not even when she showed me some paper or other she said was a marriage certificate, did a thought of belief in her story—which would have been disbelief in you—cross my mind for a moment; and when I discovered Vane Castleton's cruel plot, and saw so plainly how this woman must have been an emissary of his to try and wean me from you, I thanked God that I had never been disloyal to you even with a thought. I trusted you too well ever to believe that you would have kept such a secret from me. I loved you too fondly to wrong you in your absence by want of that faith which it is your right to expect and mine to give!"

Those were the words that struck him more fiercely than any dagger's thrust. This was the wound which that soft and childlike hand, that would have been itself cut off rather than have harmed him, gave him in the very words that vowed her love. This is what chained him, Tantalus-like, from the heaven long yearned for, now so near, but near only to mock his fetters, to elude his grasp.

He must stand before her and say, "Your faith was misplaced—that woman is my wife!"

CHAPTER XIII.

The Wife to whom Sabretasche was bound.

THE first chesnut-leaves of the Tuileries were silvered in the moonlight, and the dark Seine wound under the gloomy bridges of the old town out under the wooded

heights of St. Germain, where the oaks that had listened to the love of Louise de la Vallière, were thrusting out their earliest spring-buds. It was night, and the deep calm heavens bent above, as if in tenderness for the fair white City that lay in the valley of the Seine, like one of the gleaming lilies of its own exiled Bourbons. Around it, in the grand old chase of St. Cloud, in the forest aisles of Fontainebleau, among the silent terraces of Versailles and Neuilly, the night was calm, still, hushed to holy silence; whilst in the City of pleasures, of blood, of mirth, of death, of wit, of strife, in the City of Mirabeau and André Chénier, of Rivarol and St. Just, of Marie Antoinette and Théroigne de Méricourt, the night was full of jests, and laughter, as the gas-flowers of Mabille were lit, and the Imperial household thronged the palace of the Bourbons, and the crowds filled the Boulevards and the Cafés Chantants; the Chaumière and the Château des Fleurs, for Paris was awake, crowned with flowers, with laughter on her lips and sparkling in her eyes, gay as a young girl at her first ball—gay as she has ever been, even on the eve of her darkest tragedies, her most terrible hours.

The soft spring night came down on Paris. Before the cheval-glass in her luxurious bedchamber, with jewels on her hair and in her bosom, stood the belle of its most aristocratic réunions, shuddering, even while her maid clasped the pearls upon her arm for a ball at Madame de la Vieillecour's, at the memory of those words from her brother's lips, which bade her choose between infidelity or death. At the window of her own room, looking up to the clear stars that seemed to rebuke from their calm and holy stillness, the gay and feverish fret of the human life below, Alma Tressillian gazed on the spring night, her eyes brilliant with the radiance of hope;

he was coming home—her lover, her idol; what could await her now but a return of that joy once so rudely shivered from her grasp? Not very many yards off, in her crowded and bizarre boudoir, where finery stood the stead of taste, and overloading passed for luxury, the Trefusis read the line in the English papers which announced the arrival of her husband's troop, and threw it aside with an oath because the Crimea had not rid her of his life, and left her mistress of the portion of his wealth that would have come to her—for the law would have recognised her rights as his "wife," and she was in difficulties and in debt. Underneath the windows, that shone bright with the wax-lights of Violet's toilette-table, stood a woman, once as beautiful as she, but now haggard, tawdry, pitiful to look upon, begging of the passers-by for the coins which would procure her a draught of absinthe; that deadly tempter, that sure, slow, relentless murderer who, Jael-like, soothes us for the moment to drive the iron nail into our brain while we slumber, and whom, madman-like, we seek and crave the thirst for, though we know the end is death. Those four women—how unlike they were! Dissimilar as night and dawn; as fragrant roses and dank nightshade; as the two spirits that in fable and apologue hover over our path, the one to lead us to a Gehenna, the other to an Eden; dissimilar enough, God knows. Yet the same stars looked down on them, the same men had loved them, and, in one chain of circumstances, Fate had bound and woven them together.

That same night Sabretasche arrived in Paris. Rumours had reached him of Violet's betrothal to the German Prince. Believe them for an instant he did not. But the rumour of her projected union struck him with a deadly chill; he realised for the first time the possibility that,

one day, if he could not claim her, another might. He remembered women who had loved, perhaps, as fondly as she, who had gone to their husbands' arms with hearts aching for another; and despite his faith, trembled for the treasure of which another man might rob him any moment, and he have no right or power to avenge the theft!

He went to Paris as soon as his men were landed to learn what truth or untruth there was in this report; to look—if unseen himself—once more upon her, before another's right should claim the beauty once promised as his own.

It was midnight when he drove to where her people lived in the Champs Elysées.

A carriage stood before the entrance, the door was wide open, the hall was bright with its wax-lights, the servants were moving to and fro, and in the full glare of the light he beheld that face, which with the din of war and death around had never for an hour ceased to haunt him. She stood there, unconscious of the eyes whose gaze she had often thought would have power to recall her from the tomb; a narrow band of gold and pearls clasped her wavy chesnut hair; her large eyes were darker and more brilliant still from the shadow beneath their lids; about her were all the grace and fascination of her surpassing loveliness; and as he looked on her, she crossed the pavement and entered the carriage, still unconscious that in the darkness of the night the heart she held so dear was beating close to hers!

The carriage rolled down the Champs Elysées. Ere the door closed, Sabretasche went up to a servant and asked whither they went.

The man told him to the Duchesse de la Vieillecour's masked ball.

Sabretasche remembered that on alighting in Paris that night he had met Léonce de la Vieillecour, the Duc's son by an early marriage, who had bidden him come and see his handsome stepmother at her *bal masqué* that night, to which the Colonel had given a hasty negative. Now he drove to his rooms, took a domino and a mask, and joined one of the most brilliant and amusing réunions of the season—a *bal de l'opéra* where all the revellers had pure descents and stately escutcheons, though not, perhaps, much more stainless reputations than the fair maskers of more "equivocal position," who were treading the boards, and drinking the champagne, of the opera festivities.

He moved through the rooms, threading his way through those brilliant butterflies who toil so wearily on the treadmill of fashion. As yet he saw not the one he sought; though now and then he heard from men as they passed by him praises of her beauty, praises which turned his blood to fire. Once, a violet domino powdered with violets in gold passed him quickly; jealousy quickened his senses, and, despite the mask, he recognised Carl of Vallenstein, with whom in days gone by he had drunk Johannisberg, and played *écarté*, and smoked Havannahs under the linden-trees of his summer palace in Saxony.

He lost the Prince in the crowd; and still nowhere could he find her whom his eyes ached with longing to gaze upon again, and Léonce de la Vieillecour dragged him perforce to see the Duchess, to speak to Madame of the Crimea and of Curly.

Gwen Brandling and Madame de La Vieillecour must truly have been two different beings, that she could talk with scarce a tremor of that terrible death-scene in the hospital of St. Paul—talk of it flirting her fan, and glanc-

ing through her mask with those magnificent eyes, while the dance-music rang out in her ears! Did she really think so little of her brother, of the fair child with his golden curls and his gleeful laugh, who had played with her under the shadow of the lime-trees in their old home, long years before, when the world and its prizes were no more to her than the polished chesnuts lying at her feet, and no prophetic shadow foretold to him his dying hour in the horrors of Sebastopol? Did she really think no more of him, as she waltzed in that brilliant circle with the arms of a royal Prince around her? God knows! I will not judge her. Because there are no tears seen in our eyes, it does not follow we are dead to grief.

The windows of the ball-room opened at the far end, on to a terrace overlooking the cool shadowy gardens of the hotel; and dropping the curtain of one of the windows behind him, Sabretasche escaping from the Duchess, stood a moment in the calm air. At the end of the terrace, having evidently quitted the ball-room as he had done by one of the twelve windows that opened on the terrace, stood a woman and a man. It was Violet; and beside her, bending towards her, the domino of Carl of Vallenstein, his mask in his hand, and on his impassive features an eagerness and a glow but very rarely wakened there.

Not for his life could Sabretasche have stirred a step from where he stood; fascinated, basilisk-like, he gazed upon the woman he loved, and the man, whom the world said was soon to win from her the title by which, but two years before, he had hoped to have called her. He stood and gazed upon them, upon the one, whom he would have cherished so fondly; and upon the spoiler who might have stolen from him all he valued upon earth.

They were speaking in French, and some of their words came to him where he stood.

"That is your last resolve?"

"Yes, I am not ungrateful for the honour you would do me; but to accept it would be a crime in me and a treason to you. I know—I grieve to know—that others may have misled you, and not replied to you at the first as I bid them, and I sought this opportunity to tell you frankly, and once for all, that I can never be your wife."

"Because you love another!"

"If I do, monseigneur, such knowledge should surely have prevented your seeking me as you have now done. I should have thought you too proud to wish for an unwilling bride."

"But I love you so tenderly, mademoiselle; I would win you at every risk, and if you give me your hand, I will do my best to make your heart mine too——"

"It is impossible! Do not urge me further. Leave me, I beg of you. I shall never marry. I should have hoped my friends had made you understand this; but since they misled you, there was but one open and honourable course for me to pursue—to tell you at once, myself, that I can never be your wife, nor any other's. Your words only pain me. Leave me, I entreat of you."

He was too true a gentleman to press her further; he bowed low, and left her.

He lifted the curtain of one of the windows, and went back into the brilliantly-lighted ball-room; and Sabretasche was at last alone with the woman he loved.

With yearning love he stretched out his arms, murmuring her name—that name which had been on his lips in so many dreams, broken by the din of hostile

cannon. She turned, and, with a low faint cry, sprang forward, and fell upon his heart.

For awhile, in the joy of re-union, they forgot all save that they were together—save that he held her, with that heart beating against his which no man as yet had had power to win from him—save that he had come back to her from danger and suffering, out of the very shadow of the valley of death, from under the very stroke of the angel of destruction.

On such a meeting we will not dwell; there is little such joy on earth, and what there is, is sacred. As, after a dream of the night in which those we have lost live again, and the days long gone by bloom once more for us with all their sunshine and their fragrance we awake in the grey dawn of the winter's morning, with all the sorrow and the burden, the darkness and the weariness, of our actual life rushing back upon us; so they awoke to the memory that they had met only to part again—that they had had an interval of rest, given them only like the accused in the torture-room, even that they might live to suffer the more.

They were forced to part! If it be hard to part a living member from a quivering human body, is it not harder to sever from each other two human hearts such as nature formed to beat as one, and which are only torn asunder, at the cost of every quivering nerve, and every clinging fibre? Heaven knows, few enough hearts in this world beat in unison for those that do, to need be parted! And as the memory of their inexorable fate rose up before him, Sabretasche shuddered at the sight of that exquisite loveliness, condemned for his sake to a solitary and unblessed life, desolate as a widow, without even the title and the memories of a wife. Involuntarily he drew her closer to him—involuntarily he murmured:

"Oh, my God! we cannot live thus!"

What comfort had she to give him? None. She could only weep, clinging to him and vowing she would be true to him always—true to him whatever chanced.

"‘True to me!’ And I have nothing to give you in return but suffering—I have nothing to reward you with but anguish and trial! If I could but bear your burden with mine! If I could but suffer alone——"

"No, no," she murmured vaguely, "not alone—not alone. What we suffer, let us suffer *together*. You would not have me cease to love you?"

"My God! no. And yet, if I were not selfish, I should bid you forget me, and try to rejoice, if you obeyed. Violet, if ever you should"—and, despite all his effort, his voice was all but inaudible with the anguish and the tenderness he tried to hold down and rein in—"if you should think at any time it were possible to find happiness with another—if you fancy you could in other loves forget my fatal passion, which has been only doomed to crowd your years with suffering—*be* happy; I will never reproach you. Do not think of what *I* shall suffer; no complaint of mine shall ever trouble you. I will try and thank God that he has not, through me, cursed the life dearer than my own, and in time, perhaps, I may learn to bless the one who has given you the joy I would have——"

He ceased; his voice was low and broken; he could not complete his generous speech; the great love in him overpowered every other feeling; he could not bid her go to another! Who amongst us would ask of any man to sign his own death-warrant? Who can wonder that he shrank from consigning himself to a living death, to an existence hopeless as the grave, with throes of mortal

agony that would never cease as long as there were blood in his veins, and vitality in his heart?

She looked up in his face, the moonlight gleaming in her eyes, in which was the smile of a love without hope, yet faithful to the end—such a smile as a woman might give from the scaffold to one whom she would fain comfort to the last.

“Do you remember I said I was yours—yours for life and death—yours for ever? That vow is as sacred to me as though it were my marriage oath to you. Love, happiness, home—and with another? You can know me little, my own dearest, to speak so to me! Others have tried to urge me to infidelity. I never thought *you* would insult me too. Noble, generous, unselfish as your love is, I, who thought once to be your wife—I will be worthy of it, and I count sorrow from your hand far dearer than joy from any other’s!”

He could not answer her; he tried to thank her, but his voice failed him. To have such love as this given him, and to be forced by fate to live as though he had it not!—to leave her as though she were nothing to him, when, only grown dearer by absence, to part from her was to wrench away his very life!

His burden grew heavier than he could bear. With her words dawned the ideal of so fair a life! It rose up before his grasp with all its sweetest glories. The world—the world—what was that to them? he had but to stretch out his hand, and say to the woman who loved him, “Come!”

He became deathly pale; his head was drooped till his lips rested on hers; he stood immovable, save for the fast thick throbs of his heart, and the convulsive strength with which he pressed her against his breast. The physical conflicts he had of late passed through were

peace, rest, child's play, compared with this deadly struggle that waited for him in the first hour of his return!

Suddenly he lifted his head.

"I have no strength for this! Let us go into the world. I must put some shield between us and this torture."

He spoke rapidly, almost harshly; it was the first time that his voice had ever lost its softness, his manner the tenderness natural to him at all times, and doubly gentle ever to her. She gave one heavy, hopeless sigh, and as he heard it he shivered from head to foot. He dared no longer be with her alone, and he led her back into the crowded ball-room.

There were many masks worn that night, at that bal masqué of the Duchesse de la Vieillecour's!

Escaping from the crowd he walked along under the calm April skies, careless of the groups that jostled him on the trottoir, from the gay students, chanting their *chansons à boire*, to the piteous outcasts whose last home would be the Morgue; from the light-hearted, bright-eyed grisette of the Quartier Latin, to the wretched chiffonnier of the Faubourg d'Enfer, stopping to carry rags and filth away as wealth. He walked along, wandering far, across the Pont Neuf, and into the old City, unconscious where he went, blind to the holy beauty of the midnight stars, deaf to the noisy laughter of the midnight revellers, till a shrill voice struck on his ear, the voice of a woman, "*Limosina per la carità, signor!*"

The language of his childhood and his youth always stirred a chord of tenderness and of regret in his heart. For his fondest endearments Italian words rose to his lips, and in his hours of strongest passion, Italian was the language in which he would first and most naturally have spoken. Despite the chain that Italy had hung

upon him, he loved her, and he loved her language, with one of the deep and mournful attachments with which we love what has cost us heavily, and which is yet dear to us. From his musings, that shrill voice, with its "*Carità, carità, signor!*" startled him with a sudden shock. Perhaps something in the tones stung him with a vague pang of remembrance, a pang as of an old wound suddenly struck in the dark by an unseen hand. At any rate, involuntarily, for the sake of the Italian words, he stretched out his hand with the alms she begged.

The face was haggard, faded, stamped with the violence of a fiendish temper, inflamed with the passion for drink; the eyes red, the lips thin, the brow contracted, the hair grey and spare—the face of a virago, the face of a drunkard. Still, with an electric thrill of memory, it took him back to another face, twenty years younger, with delicate colouring, smooth brow, long shining hair, and dark voluptuous eyes—another, yet the same, marked and ruined even then with the stain of the same virago passions.

He gazed upon her, that dim and horrible memory struggling into birth by the light of the gas-lamp; her bloodshot eyes looked up at him; and *thus*, after twenty years, he and his faithless wife met once again in life.

He gazed upon her as men in ancient days gazed on the horrible visage of the Medusa, fascinated with a spell which, while they loathed it, held them tight bound there, to look till their eyes grew dim and their hearts sick unto death on what they dreaded and abhorred; fascinated, he gazed upon her, the woman who had betrayed him; fascinated, she gazed on him, the husband she had wronged. They recognised each other; the tie that had once bound them, the wrong that had once

parted them, would have taught them to know each other, though twice twenty years had parted them; he who had wedded and loved her, she who had wedded and dishonoured him.

There they stood, in the midnight streets of Paris, face to face once more. *They*, husband and wife? *They*, those whom "God had joined together?" Oh! farce and folly and falsehood!

There they stood. The man, with his noble bearing, his delicate beauty, his generous and chivalric nature, his highly-cultured intellect, his fastidious tastes, his proud susceptibilities, sensitive to dishonour, incapable of a base thought or a mean act. And *she*—the beauty she had once owned distorted with the vile temper and ravings of a shrew; on face and form the stamp of a virago's passions, of a conscience dead, of a brain besotted with the drink to which she had latterly flown as consoler and companion; a creature from whom a passer-by would shrink with loathing; the type of lowest, most debased, most loathsome womanhood!

Yet these were husband and wife!

She looked up in his face—up into those melancholy and lustrous eyes, which seemed to her the eyes of an avenging angel.

All his wrongs, all the memories of that betrayal which had stung and eaten into his very soul—all the torture which his tie to this woman had brought on his head and on hers who was dearer than his life—all the joys of which this wife, so false to him, had robbed him—all the horror, the bitterness, the misery of his bondage to this woman—all rushed upon him at the sight of the wife to whom fate condemned him. His face grew stern, with bitterness rare with him. Wronged pride, outraged trust, violated honour, loathing, scorn, pity, an unspoken

accusation, which was more full of reproach and rebuke than any words, were written on his face as, sick unto death, he turned involuntarily from her—deeply as she had erred to him, she was sunk too low for him to upbraid. With a shudder he turned from her; and at that instant with an inarticulate cry she fell down on the flagstone of the street. Confused, and but half-conscious from the draught with which she had drugged her thoughts and satisfied the passion which had grown upon her, as the passion for drink grows ever on its victims; strongly imbued with the superstition of her country; while vague stray remnants of the miracles, the credulities, and the legends of her religion still dwelt in her mind too deep for any crime to uproot her belief in them;—the pale stern face of her husband, with the dark, melancholy, reproachful eyes that gazed upon her with a voiceless rebuke which touched her into remorse for the lengthened wrong her life had done him, seemed, as he stood suddenly before her in the faint cold light of the moon, as the face of an Avenging Angel beckoning her to the chastisement of her crimes. Debilitated and semi-delirious, her strength eaten and burnt away by the deadly absinthe, her mind hazy and clouded, impressionable to the superstitions of her creed and country; struck with terror at what her weak mind fancied was a messenger of retribution from the heaven she alternately reviled, blasphemed, and dreaded; with a shrill cry of horror and appeal, she fell down at his feet, a helpless, motionless mass, lying still, death-like, huddled together in the cold, clear moonlight, on the glistening pavement, before the man her life had wronged.

His impulse was to leave her there; to fly for ever from the spectacle of the woman he had once 'loved fondly, and who had once slept innocently on his heart,

thus lost and thus degraded; to leave for ever the presence of a wife who outraged every sense, every taste, every feeling, but to whom the law still bound him, because from a drunkard no divorce is granted!

But pity, duty, humanity stayed him. Though she was his enemy, she was a woman; though she had wronged him, she was now in want; though she had forsaken, betrayed, and robbed him of more than twenty long years' peace and joy, she had *once* had his love. He had once vowed to cherish and protect her, and, though she had long ago lost all right or power to appeal to those vows, or that care, he would not leave her there, alone in the Paris streets at midnight, lying in the kennel like a dog.

A crowd had gathered round them in an instant—round the man with his patrician grace and beauty, and the woman lying at his feet, squalid and repulsive, all the more loathsome for the shadow of past loveliness that remained, showing all that nature would have left so fair, but for the vile human passions that had ruined and destroyed it. Among the crowd was a young medical student from the Quartier Latin, on his way from the Morgue, who stooped down to look at her as she lay.

A dark crimson stream was welling from her lips out on to the pavement, white and glistening in the moonlight. With a sickening shudder her husband turned away. He had seen the horrors of war; he had looked on suffering and bloodshed with that calmness and tranquillity of nerve which soldiers learn perforce; but a sudden faintness seized him at the sight of that life stream which, perchance, bore with it the last throbs of an existence which was the curse of his own. The street faded from his view, the voices of men grew confused in his ear, the grey moonlight seemed to whirl round and

round him in a dizzy haze, out of which glared and laughed in mocking horror the face of a fiend—the face of his Wife. His brain lost all consciousness; life seemed slipping from his grasp; he saw nothing, he heard nothing, he was conscious of nothing, save that horrible loathsome face close to his, with its wild bloodshot eyes dragging him with her down, down, down—away from life—into a vague hell of horror.

The night wind fanning his brow awoke him from his swoon; the voices around him seemed to bring with them a glad rush of free, healthful, welcome life; the delirium of his brain faded away in the clear light of the moon. The medical student answered the glance with which Sabretasche asked the question his lips refused to put into words.

“They have taken that poor woman, monsieur, to the Café Euphrosyne to see what is the matter with her before she goes to the hospital. My friend Lafitolle, a surgeon like myself, is with her.”

Sabretasche longed to leave the place, to go where he could run no risk of hearing, seeing, coming again in contact with the terrible phantom of the night—the phantom that was no spirit-form moulded by the fancies of his brain to be dissolved in the clear and sunny light of morning, but a dark and hopeless reality from which there was no awakening. But he knew by her beggar’s prayer that she must be in want, and his heart was too generous, too gentle, too full of knightly and chivalric feeling, to leave her without aid to suffer, perhaps to die, homeless and destitute, in the hospital of a foreign city.

The Café Euphrosyne was a low and not overcleanly house in the by-street into which Sabretasche unconsciously had wandered; it was chiefly frequented by the

small shopkeepers of the quartier; but the people of the house were good-hearted, good-natured, cheerful people—a man and his wife; with whom the world went very well in their own small part of it, and who, unlike the generality of people with whom the world goes well, were very ready and willing to aid, if they could, any with whom it went ill. Their café was open and lighted; merry suppers of students and workpeople were going on in one portion of it, and in another the good mistress of the house was venting pitiful exclamations and voluble compassion on the poor woman whom a water-carrier had lifted on his broad shoulders and borne into her house.

There lay the once beautiful Tuscan, surrounded by a crowd—the many curious, the few compassionate—the life-blood still dropping slowly from between her thin ashy lips, her blood-shot eyes closed, her haggard cheeks more hollow still from their leaden hue, the hair that he remembered so golden and luxuriant now thin and spare, and streaked with grey, far more so than her years warranted. As Sabretasche drew near the door of the chamber a murmur ran among the people that the English milord knew something of her, and on the strength of it the surgeon came forward to Sabretasche.

“Pardon, monsieur, but may I ask if you know anything of this poor woman, of her family, of where she comes from? If not, she shall go to the hospital!”

The flush of pain and of pride that passed over Sabretasche’s face, and then passed away, leaving it pallid as any statuary, did not escape the young student’s quick eyes.

“No,” he answered quickly. “Do not send her to the hospital. Let her remain here! I will defray the expenses.”

He took out his purse as he spoke, and at sight of the glittering gold within it, and the sum he tendered her out of it, Madame Riollette, though as little mercenary as a woman can be who lives by the money she makes, thought what an admirable thing it is to fall in by fate with an English milord; and immediately acquiesced in his wish for her to receive the stranger, and listened with the humblest respect while he bade her do all that was necessary.

He waited there, leaning against the door of the café, the night wind blowing on his fevered forehead, a thousand conflicting thoughts and feelings at war within him, till an older surgeon who had been brought thither came down the stairs. As he passed him, Sabretasche arrested him.

"Is she—will she——"

He paused; not to save his life could he have framed the question to ask if hers were in jeopardy; hers, dark with the wrong of twenty years to him; hers, so long the curse upon his own; hers, the sole bar between himself and happiness.

"Will she live?" guessed the surgeon. "No, not likely. She has poisoned herself with absinthe, poor wretch. I suppose you found her on the pavement, monsieur? It is very generous to assist her so liberally. Shocking thing that absinthe—shocking! Bonsoir, monsieur."

The surgeon, without awaiting a reply to any of his questions, went off, impatient to return to the écarté he had left to attend his summons to the Café Euphrosyne, and Sabretasche still leaned against the door-post in the clear starlight, while the fresh rush of the night wind, and the noisy revelry from suppers, alike passed by him unheeded.

His heart throbbed, his pulse beat rapid time, his

brain whirled with the tide of emotions that rushed through him. For more than twenty years he had not seen his wife; he had left her a young and beautiful woman, with the rounded form, the delicate outline, the luxuriant hair, the rich colouring of youth. As such he had always thought of her.

For more than a score of years his eyes had not rested on her, and the change which time had wrought, and temper and drink hastened, shocked him as a young child, laughing at its own gay, fair face in a mirror, would start, if in its stead he saw the worn and withered features he should wear in his old age.

This sudden resurrection of the memories of his youth; this sudden meeting with the wife so long unseen; this abrupt transition from the delicate, fresh, and exquisite loveliness of Violet Molyneux, to the worn, haggard, repulsive form of the woman who barred him from her; all these took a strange hold upon him, and struck him with a strange shock; such as I have felt coming out of the warm, bright, voluptuous sunshine of a summer's day into the silent, damp, midnight gloom of a cavern. And side by side with this face, seen in the glare of the gas-light, with that harsh voice and shrill cry for alms, and those wild, bloodshot eyes lifted to his, rose the memory of the one so young, so fair, with its soft lips white with pain, and the clinging clasp of the fond hands, and the quiver in the low and tender voice, "I count sorrow from your hand dearer than joy from any other." Side by side they rose before him; and with such delirium as they might know who, on the scaffold, putting up their last prayer to God, and taking their last look of the golden sunlight and the laughing earth, saw the pardon which beckoned them to life among their fellow-men from the very border of their grave, there came rushing through

his heart and brain the thought of *freedom*—the freedom that would come with Death! To banish it he would have needed to be deity, not man.

He leaned there against the door, his thoughts mingling in strange chaos, death and life; at once going back to the buried past of his youth and on to the possible future of his manhood. The students brushing past him with their light French jests, going homewards after their merry supper, roused him to the actual moment; and ere the house closed for the night he turned and sought Madame Riollette, to bid her have all that might be necessary for the comfort and the care of her charge, and wait for no solace that money could bring, to soothe the dreary passage to the grave, of the woman whose life had blasted his.

She listened to his injunctions with the reverence which gleaming gold coins are sure to gain for their owner all the world over, and promised to give the sufferer every care and comfort—a promise she would have kept without any bribe, for she was full of the ready and vivacious kindness of her country.

“Monsieur would not like to speak to the poor woman?” she asked, hesitatingly.

“No—no,” said Sabretasche, hastily, with that flush of pain which every thought of his wife brought with it.

“But, monsieur,” went on Madame Riollette, submissively, her little head, with its white cap, and its ponderous earrings, hung bashfully down, afraid of seeming rude to his English milord, “if monsieur could speak Italian it would be such a kindness to the poor woman. No one in the house could, and since she had become conscious, she kept murmuring Italian words, and seemed so wretched no one could understand them. As monsieur had been

already so nobly benevolent to her, if monsieur would not mind adding so greatly to his goodness——”

And Madame Riollette paused, awed to silence by the pallor and the sternness on his face. She thought he was angry with her for her audacity, and began a trembling apology. Poor woman! his thoughts were far enough away from *her*. A struggle rose within him; he had an unconquerable loathing and shrinking, from ever looking again upon the face of the woman who had wronged him; yet a strange mournful sort of pity awoke in him, as he heard of her muttering words in their mutual language in foreign ears upon her death-bed, and he thought of her young, lovely, as he had first seen her among the pale-green olive-groves of Montepulito.

He stood still some moments, his face turned from the inquisitorial light of Madame Riollette's hand-lamp; then he lifted his head:

“Lead the way.”

She led the way up a narrow staircase and along a little corridor, and opened for him a door through which he had to bend his head to pass, and ushered him into a chamber; small, it is true, but with all the prettiness and comforts she had been able to gather into it, and neither close nor hot, but full of the sweet evening air that had come in; blowing far from the olive-groves of the sufferer's native Tuscany, across the purple Alps and the blue mountains of Auvergne, over the deep woods, and stretching meadows, and rushing rivers of the interior, till it came fresh and fragrant, laden with life and perfume, bearing healing on its wings to the heated, feverish, crowded streets of Paris.

Sabretasche took the lamp from the woman's hand, and signed her to retire, a hint which Madame Riollette interpreted by seating herself by the little table in the

window and taking out her knitting, pondering, acute Parisienne that she was, on what possible connexion there could be between the poor, haggard, wretched-looking woman on her bed, and the graceful, aristocratic milord Anglais.

By the light of the lamp in his hand, Sabretasche stood and gazed upon his wife, as she lay unconscious of his gaze, with her eyes closed, and scarcely a pulsation to be seen that could mark life from death. He looked upon her face, with the stamp of vicious and virago passion on every line, on the nervous hand that had been raised in their last parting against his life; the hand which bore on its finger the key that had locked the fetters of marriage round and about with such pitiless force, the badge of a life-long bondage, the seal that stamped the death-warrant of his liberty and peace!—the wedding-ring that in the joyous glow, and blindfold trust of youth he had placed there, his heart beating high, with all a lover's tenderest thoughts, the sign as he then believed of life-long joy and union with a woman who loved him as well and as truly as he loved her! He thought of his bride as she had looked to him on his marriage morning in Tuscany, fair as woman could ever need to be, with the orange-flowers and myrtles gathered with the dews of dawn glittering upon them, wreathed among her rich and golden hair; he looked upon her now, with the work of twenty years stamped upon her face, twenty years of wrong, of evil, of debasing thought, of avaricious passions, in which she had lived on the money of the husband she had wronged, to spend it in the lowest of all vices, drink. He knew nothing of how those twenty years had been passed, but he could divine nearly enough, seeing the wreck and ruin they had wrought. And he was tied to this woman!—if she rose from that

bed of sickness, he was bound to her by law! His heart recoiled with horror, and sickened at the thought; reason, sense, nature revolted, outraged and indignant at the hideous bondage. He longed to call the world that condemned him to such, around him where he stood, and ask them how they dared to fetter him to such a wife, to such a tie; chaining him to more horrible companionship than those inflict who chain the living body to the festering corpse, never to be unloosed till welcome death release the prisoner, consigned to such horror unspeakable by his own kind, by his own fellow-men!

As he gazed upon her, the light of the lamp falling on her eyes aroused her from the semi-conscious trance into which she had fallen, weakened by the loss of blood, which, though not great, had taken away the little strength and power which she had, all vitality and health having been eaten gradually up by the poison she had loved and courted—poison slow, but ever sure.

Her eyes unclosed and fastened on him with a wild, vacant stare; then she covered her face with her hands, and cowered down among the bed-clothes in mortal terror, muttering trembling and disjointed words:

"Oh, Santa Maria! have mercy, have mercy! I have erred, I have sinned, I confess it! Send him away, send him away; he will kill me with his calm, sad eyes, they pierce into my soul! I was mad—I hated him—I knew not what I did. Oh, Mother of God, call him away! I am ready, I will come to the lowest hell if you will, so that I may not see him. His eyes, his eyes.—Holy Jesus, call him away!"

Her voice rose in a faint, shrill shriek, the phantasma of her brain was torture to her. She cowered down among the clothes, trembling and terror-stricken, before the gaze of the man she had betrayed, who, to her

wandering brain, seemed like an avenging angel sent to carry her to an eternal abode among the damned.

"Poor soul, poor soul!" murmured Madame Riolette to her knitting-needles, "that's how she's been going on for the last hour. I wish the milord Anglais would let me send for the Père Lavoisier. If anybody can give rest to a weary sinner it is he."

Sick at heart with the scene, and filled with a mournful pity for the wreck he saw before him, Sabretasche tried to calm her with some Italian words of reassurance and compassion; but the sound of her native language seemed only to excite her more wildly still. She glared at him; her dark eyes, bloodshot and opened wide, recalling to him their last parting, when they had glittered upon him with the fire of a tigress, and the hatred of a murderess. She sprang up with a convulsive movement and signed him frantically from her.

"Go away, go away! I know you; you are my husband; you are come from hell to fetch me. I have sinned against you, and I would sin again. I hate you—I *hate* you! Go to your northern love! but you can never marry her—you can never marry her. I am your wife. All the world will tell you so, and I will not let you kill me. I will live—I will live, to curse you as I have——"

She sank back on her pillows, her little strength exhausted with the violence of her passions; her eyes still glaring, but half consciously, on him—quivering, panting, foaming at the mouth like a wild animal after a combat; there was little of humanity, nothing of womanhood, left in her—and this woman was his *wife*.

She lay on the bed, her wild eyes fixed on him, breathing loudly and quickly, defiant, though powerless, like a wounded tigress, stricken down in her strength,

but with the fell ferocious instinct still alive within her. Then she began again to shrink, and tremble, and cower before her own thoughts; and hiding her face in her hands, began to weep, murmuring some Latin words of the Church prayers, and calling on the Virgin's aid.

"I have sinned—I have sinned; oh, Madre di Dio, save me, *Fili Redemptor mundi Deus, miserere nobis*. What are the words—what are the words; will no one say them? I used to know them so well! I can remember nothing; perhaps I am dying—dying, unconfessed and unabsolved. Where is Padre Cyrillo, he would give me absolution? Let me confess, let me confess, O Santa Maria, before I die!"

Weary of the scene whose horrors he had no power to soften, heart-sick of the human degradation before him, Sabretasche turned to Madame Riolette:

"Is there no priest you could summon?"

"Oh, yes, monsieur," answered that good little Catholic, warmly. "There is the Père Lavoisier, the curé of Sainte Cécile, and so good a man! He will rise any hour, and go through any weather, to bring a ray of comfort to any soul; and he can speak her language, too, for he is half Italian."

"Send for him," said Sabretasche, briefly, "and show me to another room. You shall be well paid for all your trouble. I knew your patient in other days; I intend to remain here till the surgeon's next visit."

He spoke more briefly and hurriedly than was his wont; but Madame Riolette did not heed it. She would have been only too glad to have him always there, provided he paid as he had done that night, and ushered him with many apologies into the room which had lately witnessed the students' supper. The scent of the air, reeking with stale wine, sickened him; and throwing

open one of the small casements he sat down by the open window, leaning out into the cool, silent street, over whose high pointed roofs the grey dawn was growing lighter, and the morning stars larger. He felt a strange, irresistible fascination to stay there till he knew whether this life would revive to be again a curse to his; or whether the icy hand of death would unloose the fetters man refused to sever. Yet they were horrible hours—hours of fear and longing, of dread which seemed so hideously near akin to murder; of wild, delirious hope, which for his life he could not have chilled; horrible hours to him in which he waited to know whether with another's death existence would bloom anew for him, and from another's grave the flowers of hope spring up in all their glories.

He had bade Madame Riollette let him know when the surgeon had paid his next visit; and awaiting the medical man's opinion, he sat by the open window, while the soft dawn grew clearer and brighter, and the sparrows began to twitter on the house-tops, and the hum of human life to awake in Paris. He sat there for what seemed to him an eternity, his nerves strung to tension, till every slight sound in the street below him, the taking down of the shop shutters, the cry of the water-carriers, the bark of the dogs, jarred upon his brain, and every minute passed heavily away as though it were a cycle of time. His heart beat fast and thick as a knock came on the panels of the door, and it was with difficulty he could steady his voice to give the permission to enter. He expected to see the surgeon; instead, he saw the curé of Sainte Cécile, a mild, silver-haired, gentle-voiced old man, of whom all Madame Riollette's praise was true.

"May I speak to monsieur?"

"Certainly."

"You know the sufferer to whom I was called?"

Sabretasche bent his head; evasion of the truth never at any moment occurred to him.

"You are her husband?"

The blood rushed over his face; he shrank as from the insult of a blow from the abrupt question which told him that his connexion with the woman who dishonoured his name, who cursed his career, who blotted his escutcheon, and had now sunk so low that any honest day-labourer might have shrunk from acknowledging her as his wife, was no longer a secret, but known so widely that a stranger might unhesitatingly tax him with it.

"By whose authority do you put these questions to me?" he asked, with that careless hauteur which had made the boldest man among his acquaintance pause before he provoked Vivian Sabretasche.

"By no authority, monsieur," replied the priest, mildly, "except that which commands me to do what I think right without regard to its consequences to me. Under the seal of confession I have heard the sufferer's story; the one her life has sinned against is her husband; him she saw this night standing by her bedside; him she will never now rest without seeing again, to ask his pardon. When Madame Riolette told me of your benevolence to the poor woman who had been found dying in the street, I thought you must be he whom she implores Heaven to bring to her, that she may sue for his forgiveness before the grave closes over her——"

"Is she dying?" His voice was hoarse and inarticulate as he asked the brief question.

"Fast; when another night closes in—nay, most likely when noon is here, she will have ceased to live."

Sabretasche turned to the window, and leaned his

forehead on his arm, the blood rushed like lightning through his veins, his breathing was quick and loud, like a man who, having borne a weary burden through a long day of heat and toil, flings it suddenly aside; and his lips moved with a single word, too low to stir the air, but full of inexpressible tenderness and thanksgiving,—the one word, "*Violet!*" Alone, he would have bowed his face upon his hands and wept like a woman; in the presence of another he turned with that calm and equable gravity which, until he had last loved, nothing had had power to disturb. The traces of deep and strong emotions were on his face, but he spoke as tranquilly as of old.

"You have guessed rightly; I am her husband by law, though I myself for twenty years have never held, nor would ever hold, myself as bound in any way by moral right to her. She has forfeited all claim or title to call me by such a name. Since you have heard her story—if she have told it you as truthfully as those of your creed profess to tell everything in their confession—you can judge that an interview between one who has caused, and another who has suffered from, a lifelong wrong, could be productive of peace to neither. I have cared for her, finding her suddenly ill in the streets; I have sent for medical aid; I have given Madame Riolette, and I now give you, full power to do everything that wealth can do to soothe and soften her last moments; beyond that, I do not recognise her as my wife, and I refuse to see again a woman who, when I left her, would have sought my life, and who, even now, drove me away from her with curses."

He spoke calmly, but there was a set sternness on his face; compassion had made him act gently to his wife, but it had not banished the haughty and bitter

wrath which wronged pride and outraged trust had ever awakened at her memory or her name.

"But, monsieur," interrupted the old curé, gently, "if your wrongs are great, death will soon expiate them; if her errors to you are many, she will be soon judged by a God more merciful, we must all for our own sakes hope, than Man is ever to his fellows. I have just administered the last offices to her. I should scarcely have done that had she been still hardened and impenitent. She repents; can any of us do more than that, monsieur? And have not all, even the very best, much of which we *must* repent if we have any conscience left? It is hardly fitting for us to sit in judgment on any other, when in ourselves we have much evil unexamined and unannealed, and, if there were no outer checks, but constant opportunity and temptation, crime enough in the purest of us to make earth a hell? Your wife repents, monsieur. She has something to confess to you, without which she cannot die in peace, not even in such peace as she may yet win, poor soul! A word from you will calm her, will give her the only comfort she can ever have this side the grave. You have very much to pardon; but oh, monsieur, when you lie on your own death-bed, you will thank God if you have conquered yourself, and not been harsh to her on hers."

They were simple words. The curé of Sainte Cécile had never had much eloquence, and had been chosen for a crowded parish, where kind words and good deeds were more wanted, and better understood, than rounded periods and glowing tropes. They were simple words, but they touched the heart of his auditor, awaking all that was gentle, just, and tolerant in his nature. It was true. What was he, that he should judge?—what his

life, that he had title to condemn another? It was the creed he had ever held in that fashionable world, where men and women sin themselves and redeem their errors by raking up scandal, and preaching moral sermons upon others, and seek to hide the holes in their own garments by hooting after another's rags; it had ever been his creed that toleration, and not severity, was the duty of humanity, and he had sneered with his most subtle wit at those who, from the pulpit or the forum, rebuked the sins they in themselves covered, with their surplices, or their robes. Should he turn apostate from his creed now, when it called him to act up to it? Should he dare to be harsh to this woman, simply because it happened to be against himself that her errors had been committed? He wavered a moment, then—his sense of clemency and justice conquered.

"You are right. I have no title to judge her. I will see her, if you think it best."

And the priest, as he looked up into his face, with its pale and delicate beauty, and its earnest and melancholy eyes, thought "what a noble heart this woman has wronged and thrown away."

CHAPTER XIV.

Release.

ALONE, Sabretasche mounted the narrow staircase, entered the bed-chamber, and signed to Madame Riollette to leave him there—alone, by the grey faint light of the dawn, he drew near the death-bed of his wife, and stood silently beside her. The opiate the surgeon had given her in his second visit had soothed and calmed her; the wildness and ferocity of her eyes had gone, but the hand of death lay heavily upon her. She looked up

once at him as he stood there, then covered her face with her hands and wept, not loudly or passionately, but long and unrestrainedly, like a child after a great terror.

"I hear that you wished to see me," said Sabretasche, in that low, sweet, melodious tongue in which, long ago, among the orange-trees and olive-groves of Tuscany, he had vowed his love-words to her.

She lifted her eyes to his with a shrinking shame and terror that touched him to the core.

"I have wronged you—I have hated you—I have cursed you—I have stood between you and your happiness for twenty weary years," she moaned. "You can never forgive me—never—never; it were too much to hope! Yet I wanted to see you once before I die; I wanted to tell you all. Even though your last words be a curse upon me, I should have no right to complain. I have deserved it."

"You need not fear my curse," answered Sabretasche, slowly and with effort, as though speech were painful. "If I cannot say I forgive, I am not likely to insult you in your suffering with useless recrimination. We have been separated for one-and-twenty years; I am willing not to evoke the wrongs and dishonour of the past, but to part in such peace as memory will allow."

He spoke gently, but with an involuntary sternness and a deep melancholy, so deep that it was an unconscious reproach, which struck with a keener pang into the heart of the woman who had wronged him than violent words of fierce upbraiding. She clenched her hands convulsively:

"Do not speak so gently, for God's sake, or you will kill me! I would rather hear you curse, rebuke, reproach, upbraid me; anything rather than those low, soft

tones. I have wronged you, hated you, lied to you; robbed you, betrayed you, dishonoured you; to speak so gently to me is to heap coals of fire on my head! I repent—I repent, God knows; but, at the eleventh hour, what value is my remorse? For twenty years I have wronged you; what good is it for me to tell you I repent when I am dying, and can harm you no longer if I would?"

Sabretasche was silent; her voice, her gestures, her words struck open his wounds afresh. He felt afresh the cruel, bitter sting of his betrayal; he thought of Violet, of all he had suffered, of all he had made her suffer; and his hatred for the woman who had stood so long between them flamed up in all its strength. He might have pardoned his own wrongs, but the sufferings of the one beloved by him—never!

His wife glanced upward at his averted face, and shivered at the dark look it wore:

"Madre di Dio! you will never forgive me?"

He was silent. Again she repeated her passionate wailing prayer:

"Madre di Dio! you will never forgive me?"

He glanced at her with a shudder and a weary sickening sigh from his heart's depths:

"*I cannot!*"

The words roused the evil in her, which the curé had thought those vain "last offices" had exorcised; the savage passion gleamed again in them, and she sprang up like a dying panther:

"No! because you love your English mistress! Would to Heaven I could live and keep you from her!"

"Silence!" broke in Sabretasche, so sternly that she started and trembled as she heard him. "Never dare to pollute *her* name with your lips! I came at your request,

but not to be reproached or questioned. Your own conscience must accuse you of the wrong you did me. For more than twenty years you were content to live upon the gold of the husband you had betrayed. For more than twenty years you have been a clog upon my life, a stain upon my name, a festering wound in my side, a bar from all peace, all happiness; and yet because I could not *prove*, you would not even make the only reparation left in your power—acknowledgment of the wrong you knew had parted us!"

"But I acknowledge it *now*; I repent it *now*, Vivian! No one can do more than that!"

To the lips of the man of the world rose naturally the satire which was habitual. Yes! she confessed and repented now that life was ebbing from her grasp, revenge no longer possible, and acknowledgment unneeded; as people who have played their last card out on earth, turn frightened, with weakened nerve, to God, insulting Him and flattering their priests with "death-bed repentances!" and timorous recantations, which they would have laughed at in their day of better health and stronger brain! But he was too generous and too merciful to utter the sneer which rose involuntarily to his lips, to a woman helpless and dying, who, however bitterly she had betrayed him, was now powerless to harm. The wretched state of a creature he had once loved, struck him with keen pain; her suffering, her poverty, her degradation touched him, and he could not look on the utter wreck of what he had last seen, perfect in youth and beauty, without pity, in which his own hate was quenched, his own wrong avenged. He answered her more gently, and very sadly:

"I did not come here to reproach you. Your conscience must know the wrong you did me, and my own

life has not been pure enough to give me any title to fling a stone at you."

Well said! Libertine, sceptic, egotist, man of pleasure and fashion, as society called him, he could act up, with his most cruel enemy, to his doctrine of toleration. It is more than most do who preach louder and with more "orthodoxy!" But then Sabretasche did not pretend to be a saint; he was simply a man of honour! She looked at him long and wonderingly: to the fierce, inconstant, and vindictive Tuscan, this justice simply for the sake of justice, this toleration, given to her *against* his impulse, merely because he considered it her due, was new and very strange.

"You humble me bitterly," she said, between her teeth. "But I have sinned; it is right punishment. I *did* wrong you. I wedded you because I was sick of being caged in Montepulito. I never loved you; and the solitude you seemed to think like Paradise sickened and annoyed me, till I succeeded in making it a Hell. I cared nothing for anything you cared for; your love of refinement was a constant restraint upon me; your mode of thought and feeling a constant annoyance to me. I grew to hate you, because you were too high, too delicate, too much of a gentleman for me; your superiority jarred upon me, I hated you for it. I hated you even for your affection, your gentleness, your generosity, your sweet temper, which were so many silent rebukes to me. I hated you still more when I loved Fulberto Lani."

As she spoke her lover's name, a shudder of dark loathing passed over his face; he thought of her paramour—coarse, illiterate, low-born, low-bred—and felt, fresh as though dealt him but yesterday, the sting of his wife's infidelity.

"I hated you," went on the Tuscan, rapidly, with the fictitious force given her from the opiate; "and when you surprised him with me, and taxed me, I would not confess to it, for I knew the confession would set you free, and I swore you should rue the fetters with which we had loaded each other. You left me. Well you might! Not long after Lani left me too; he was an idle, worthless, inconstant do-nothing, the lover of half the women in Naples, and faithful to none. Then—you know how, yearly, my brother extorted from you the money on which we lived? Pepe was extravagant; I lived in gaiety and excitement, and sank lower and lower every day. I should have disgraced you, indeed, if our connexion had been declared to your aristocratic friends! I—a drunkard—*your* wife! At last, after twenty years, we heard that you loved a young English girl; loved her more than you had done other women; loved her so that you would have married her. . . ."

She was touching on dangerous chords if she wanted his forgiveness!—his face grew dark, his soft sad eyes stern, and he turned involuntarily from her.

"When we heard that you were in love with her, and that you were going to the south of France, Pepe, unknown to you, followed, and laid in your way the Neapolitan journal with the death of my aunt Sylvia; he knew it was so worded that you would believe I was dead, would deem yourself free, and would marry again where you loved. He guessed rightly; then, thinking to get from you a heavy bribe for silence, he went to you to offer, if you married your young English love, never to betray your connexion with us. You refused. We could not understand your scruples. The signorina would never have known that her marriage was illegal, or that she was not really your wife. You refused, and we were

beggared. I had no money to go to law against you to make you provide for me, as Pepe had threatened. We could bribe you no longer; and you went to the war in the East. My brother left me to shift for myself as I might, when he could no longer make money by my name; and I was very poor—how poor *you* cannot think. I have sunk lower and lower, till you have found me a beggar in the streets of Paris. I have done you cruel wrong; I have given you hate for love, betrayal for trust; I have robbed you for twenty years; I have stood between you and your happiness, and gloried in the curse I was to you. . . .”

She stopped, panting for breath, and exhausted; and Sabretasche stood looking out of the window at the dawn, as it rose clearer and brighter in the fair morning skies. It had been, indeed, God knows, a cruel wrong—a wrong which had stretched over all the years of his prime—a wrong which had stolen all peace and joy from him, and from one far dearer than himself.

“Come here! Come nearer!” said his wife, in faint and hollow tones, as the temporary strength that her cordial had given her faded away.

His face was still white and sternly set as he turned unwillingly.

“Look at me!” she moaned piteously, lifting to his the drawn, thin, sallow face, from which every trace of beauty had long departed; and as he looked he shuddered. “*Now* can you curse me? Has not life avenged you?”

He was silent; if life had avenged his wrongs on her, he felt that it had cursed him for no sin, chastised him for no error, since to this woman, at least, he had given affection and good faith, and had been rewarded by infidelity, ingratitude and hate!

"Say something to me, Vivian," she moaned, in pitiful despair—"say something gentler to me! If you knew what it is to die with the curse of one we have injured on our heads! The past is so horrible, the future so dark! O God! Do not send me down into my grave with your curse upon me, to pursue me through eternity, to hunt me into hell!"

"Hush!" said Sabretasche, his low soft tones falling with a "peace, be still!" on the storm of remorse and misery before him. "Hush! I do not curse you—God forbid—I tell you my own life is not pure enough for me to have any right to condemn yours. If I cannot say that I forgive you—at least I will do my best to think as gently of you as I can, and to forget the past. I cannot promise more."

She caught his hands in hers; she wept, she thanked, she blessed him, with all the excitable vehemence of her national character. Weakened by suffering, terrified by death, she seemed to cling to but one thought, one hope—the forgiveness of the man whose love she had wronged from the hour she had stood with him at the marriage altar, so often the funeral pyre for all man's hopes, and peace, and liberty; where, as by the priests of old, living human souls are offered up in cruel holocausts to a fanatic folly!

"I have but one thing more to tell you—I must hasten before my strength fails me," she began, raising herself upon the pillows—"I want' to speak to you, Vivian, of my child—your child——"

"The child of such a mother!—I will hear nothing of her!"

"Santa Maria! why?"

"*Why?* Dare you ask? How can I tell that she was mine? And even if she were, what sort of woman must

she be, reared by you? You try my forbearance too far. I come here at your desire, I forgive you my own wrongs; but do more—be connected again with the past curse of my life, or recognise in the slightest way any one of the brood that conspired to stain my name, to rob me of my peace, and to bribe me to a lie;—give my name or my countenance to one bred up under the tutelage of those who, shameless themselves, betrayed me in my youth, and tempted me in my manhood to dishonour—once for all, I tell you, woman, that *I will not!*”

He spoke with more impatient anger and passionate bitterness than were often roused in his gentle and indolent nature. She had presumed too far on his forbearance! to try and farm on him a daughter of hers, probably Lani's child, or, if his own, one, whose education and mode of life must have made such as he would blush for, such as he would loathe;—to be asked to give to such an one his name,—the name that Violet Molyneux would take;—roused all that was haughtiest and darkest in his nature. She had gone too far. The very thought was hateful, abhorrent, loathsome!

“She *was* your child,” the Tuscan repeated eagerly—“I swear it, and I should hardly perjure myself on my death-bed! God knows whether she is living now or not; I cannot have harmed her, for I have not seen her ever since she was two years old. I put her out to nurse as soon as she was born, in a village near Naples, with a peasant-woman. Six months after her birth you and I parted, never to meet again till to-night! When the child was two years old her foster-mother brought her to me; she was going far away—I forget where—Calabria, I think, and she could keep her with her no longer. She

was very lovely, poor little thing, but she reminded me of you."

"Silence!" broke in Sabretasche, passionately. To have any link of the hated chain of the past cling about him still; to have any one of this loathsome Tuscan brood forced on him now, when death was nigh to relieve him from the shame which had festered into his soul so long, stung him beyond endurance. The child of such a mother!—what had he for her but hatred? "Silence! I will not hear her name. I will have none of her; if she press her claim on me I will refuse to acknowledge her. Whether or no she be daughter of mine, I disown her for ever, she is dead to me for ever. Great God! is the madness of my boyhood never to cease from pursuing me!"

The dying woman raised herself on her bed with eager thirsty haste to speak while yet her brain could serve her, while yet her lips could move:

"But you must hear me—you must! I cannot die in peace unless I tell you—she *was* your child!"

"My child or not—she was *yours*, and I disown her! My life shall not be shamed by her, my name shall not be polluted by her."

"But hear me——"

"I *will not*. If she be mine, I will acknowledge no daughter of yours. You have dishonoured me enough; my future at least shall be free from you."

"But hear her story—hear her story! You need never see her, never know her, but let me confess all to you—let me die in peace," wailed the wretched woman, piteously. "Before her birth I never sinned to you; I would not lie now, *now*, on my death-bed, face to face with Satan and Hell! She was not like you, but she had something of your look sometimes, something of your

smile; her voice was like yours, too, and—you were her father! and I hated the very sight of her face. She did not like me—how should she! I was a stranger to her. She was unhappy at the loss of her nurse; she was afraid of me; I dare say I was cruel to her. At that time an English gentleman, who was staying at Naples, saw her, and took a great fancy to her. His own little granddaughter, the same age as herself, had lately died; the only relative of any kind he had left to him. She pleased him very much; he fancied he could trace a resemblance between her and his dead grandchild, and, after a time, he offered to adopt her, and to take her to England, to bring her up as if she were his own; that she was not so, no one would know, for his son's little girl, whose parents had both died since her birth, had been born in Italy, and had never been taken home. I was only too glad to be rid for ever of her, she made me think constantly of you, and I hated you more bitterly since I had wronged you. I let her go, poor little child! I had some conscience left, and I could not bear to hear her voice even in the distance; I could not bear to see her smile, for she seemed to haunt me and reproach me for the wrong I had done her father. I let her go with the Englishman; and I have never seen her since. God knows, wherever she has been, she has been better than she would have been with me. I have never seen her; but on Christmas-eve, at Notre Dame, a young girl tendered me charity, and as I looked in her face something struck me as like your child's—as like what she might be as a woman. I do not know—it was very vague—but her smile made me think of you, and she gave me something of that sad, gentle, pitying look with which you had left me twenty years before. Most likely it was mere fancy—but it made me think of her and you. If

I had not sent her from me, I should not be alone in my misery, as I am now!"

She ceased, and tears rolled slowly down her haggard cheeks. All her life this woman had thrown away the human love which had been offered her; without it her death-bed was very cheerless, with but two memories beside it—of the husband she had wronged and the child she had deserted.

"You never knew that English stranger, Vivian?" she asked, wistfully.

"What was his name?" asked Sabretasche, coldly.

"Tressillian."

"Tressillian!" repeated Sabretasche, with an involuntary start—"Tressillian! And your daughter's name?"

"Was Alma."

"Alma Tressillian! Good God!"

And as things long forgotten recur to memory at a sudden touch akin to them, he remembered how we had noticed her resemblance to his mother's portrait hanging in his drawing-room; how he himself had observed the likeness, though, occupied with other thoughts, it had made no impression upon him; Alma Tressillian his daughter! Little as he had noticed her, now, swift as thought, there came to his mind all he had ever seen or heard of her; he remembered his two visits to St. Crucis; he remembered her extraordinary talent for art—the genius inherited from himself; and—he remembered, too, what Carlton had told that night in the Crimea, that she was the mistress of Vane Castleton. Was it true? Despite her education, her frankness, her apparent delicacy, had she, indeed, hid unseen within her the leaven of her mother's nature? Had heartlessness, sensuality, treachery of character, been the sole inheritance his wife had bequeathed her child? As these memories and thoughts

rushed rapidly and disconnectedly through his brain, she watched the swift changes of expression which swept over his face.

She grasped his arm eagerly:

"You have seen her—you know her, Vivian? What is she like now? Is she a true, fond, pure-hearted woman, or is she like me? Is she cursed with any of my vile passions? If she be, seek her out. For the love of Heaven, find her and redeem her from her fate, if to do it you must tell her how low her mother has fallen; her mother, who loved her less than the very beasts of the field can love their offspring."

To have told this dying wretched woman of that baseless scandal with Vane Castleton, of which he knew nothing, and which all his knowledge of human character made him doubt, would have been brutality. He answered her gently and soothingly:

"I have seen her; or, at least I have seen a lady whom I always heard was Mr. Tressillian's granddaughter; not much of her, it is true, but sufficient to make me think her a 'true, fond, pure-hearted woman'—all that a mother might most long for her daughter to be. Will you swear to me before God that she *was* my child?"

With her national vehemence—that vehemence of expression which Alma had inherited from her—the Tuscan kissed the little ebony crucifix which Madame Riollette had placed before her:

"I swear it, Vivian, as I hope for pardon for my sins from that God whom my whole life has outraged!"

Sabretasche silently bowed his head. He knew that though she might have lied to him the moment before, she would not have dared to swear a falsehood to him by that symbol, which her church had taught her to hold

so sacred; and though at another hour he would have smiled at the superstition which made an oath sacred, where honour would have been broken ruthlessly; something, despite all his wrongs, touched him painfully in these hopeless last hours of the woman whom he once had loved in his warm, glad, poetic youth—that youth which she had quenched and ruined with the bitterness of betrayal, and bound down into bondage with the curse of iron chains.

She asked one more question:

“Where did you see her, Vivian?”

“Twice at her own home, and once at the house of one of our English nobles.”

“And was she happy?”

“She seemed so.”

“Thank God! You will never tell her about me—never mention me to her—never let her know that the mother who neglected her, fell so low and vile, that she was a beggar in the streets; a thing whom she passed by with a dole of charity, with a pitying shudder? Never tell her. Promise me you will not. Why should she hear of me, only to know that I first hated and then disgraced her. Promise me, Vivian!”

“I promise!”

Little as she could understand him, she knew him too well to exact an oath from him.

She looked at him wistfully.

“You are very noble! You shame me more with your goodness than you have done with curses and reproaches.”

“No,” answered Sabretasche, gently. “I have no claim to virtue. My life has been far too full of errors and self-indulgence, for me to have title left to give me right to condemn another. If you have sinned, so have I. No

human beings are spotless enough to judge each other. As for curses, God forbid! They would be rancorous indeed, to follow you to the grave."

She gave a weary sigh; his forgiveness humbled and shamed her more than any upbraidings. Then her eyes closed, and she lay still. All the extraneous strength and vigour, given her by cordial and opium, had died away. She lay still, her breathing short and weak, her brow contracted, her limbs exhausted and powerless, the hand of death heavy upon her; her lips apart, her cheeks gray and hollow, her brain confused, and weighed down with the cloudy thoughts, and memories, and fears, which haunted her last hours.

And Sabretasche stood beside her, musing on the strange accident which had led him to the death-bed of the woman who had made all the misery of his life; of that cruel and inexorable tie which had bound him for so long; of the deep, unsolved problem of human nature; that book written in such different language for every reader, that it is little marvel that every man thinks his own the universal tongue, and fails even to spell out his brother's translation of it. This woman had hated him; he had loathed her; they had been chained together by a rite the world chose to call indissoluble; they had been parted by a fierce and ineffaceable wrong; after twenty years' severance, what could this man and woman, once connected by the closest tie, once parted by the hottest passions, know of each other? what could they read of each other's heart? what could they tell or understand of each other's temptations, sufferings, and errors? And yet Church and Law, in mock morality, God help us! had bound them together, till Death, more powerful and more kindly than their fellow-men, should come to the rescue and release them!

That lifelong union of Marriage! Verily, to enter into it, it needs a great and an abiding love.

So he stood watching beside his dying wife. A future, fond and radiant, lay for him in the soft haze of coming years; yet, ere he turned to it, he paused a moment to look back to the past, to its sorrow, its sin, its trial, its conflict, its bitter wrongs. And with a new-born and unutterable happiness awaking in him, a saddened pity stole over him for the broken wreck of humanity which lay in its last feeble life-throbs before his eyes; and hatred, resentment, scorn, faded away, quenched in deep compassion. If his character had been hers, his impulses, opportunities, education, temptation hers, how could he tell but what his sins had been like hers also? They were such, indeed, to him, whose nature was generosity, and idol honour, as seemed darkest and most loathsome; but in that dying chamber he bowed his head, and turned his eyes away from them. Just and tolerant to the last, he held it not his office to condemn—now, above all, when Death came as his avenger.

So he stood and watched beside his dying wife, the woman who had wedded him only to emancipate herself from an irksome home, and who had been a ruthless barrier between himself and liberty and peace—stood and watched her, while without, the bright morning light dawned in the eastern skies, and the song of the birds made sweet music beneath the eaves, and the soft western winds swept in through the casement into the chamber of the dying; herald of the Life born for him, and come to him, out of Death. Suddenly her eyes unclosed with a vague, lifeless stare, and she awoke to semi-consciousness as the bells of Notre Dame chimed the hour of seven—awoke startled, dreamy, delirious.

“Hark! there is the church-bell. What is it? Ah! I

remember, we used to gather the lilies and the orange-flowers to dress up the high altar at home. I wish I could go there once—just once before I die, to see the vineyards, and the wheat-fields, and the olive-groves again. There are such sweet warm winds, such bright glowing skies—ah! I was happy, I was innocent, I was sinless *there!* Why are those bells ringing? Are they for early mass? No; it is the Angelus. I forgot! We must take lilies, plenty of lilies for the altar; but *I* must not touch them, I should soil them, the lilies are so pure so spotless, and I am so sunk, so polluted; . . . the lilies would wither if *my* hands touched them, and the priests would thrust me from the altar, and the Virgin would ask me for my child. I used to pray; I cannot now! Hark! those bells are ringing, and I know the words, but I cannot say them. . . . Help me, help me. Pray, pray; do you hear—pray.”

With piteous agony the cry rang out on the still air of the breaking day, as the dews gathered gray and thick upon her brow, and the glazing mist came over her sight, and in the darkness of coming death she struggled for memory and prayer, as a child gropes in the gloom.

“Pray—pray. What are the words? Say them—in pity—in mercy! *He* has forgiven;—God will forgive! Pray—pray!”

And the voice of the man whom her life had wronged, fell softly on her ear through the dull, dizzy mists of death, as he bent over her and uttered with soothing pity the words of her Church, the prayer of her childhood, which from his lips to her was the seal of an eternal and compassionate Pardon:—

Pater noster qui es in cœlis, sanctificetur nomen tuum: adveniat regnum tuum: fiat voluntas tua sicut in cœlo et in terra; panem nostrum, quotidianum,

da nobis hodie; et dimitte nobis debita nostra, sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris; et ne nos inducas in tentationem sed libera nos à malo. Amen!

Standing beside his dying wife, he spoke the prayer to the One Creator—the prayer which should have no Creeds; and as the old familiar words winged their way to her, bringing on their echoes, memories of days long past, and innocence long lost, the wild eyes grew tamer, the bent brow relaxed, the hardened lines of age and vice grew soft; and before the last Amen had left his lips, with one faint, broken, mournful sigh,—she died. And he standing beside her, bowed his head in reverence, before the great mystery of life and death; and thanked God that his last words to her had been of mercy and of pardon, that his last words had been to her, even as the words of Arthur unto Guinevere—

All is passed; the sin is sinned; and I,
Lo! I forgive thee, as Eternal God
Forgives; do thou for thine own soul the rest.

CHAPTER XV.

In the Forest of Fontainebleau.

ON the meeting of those so long held apart by the laws of Man, I need not dwell. Nothing now stood between them; and within a few days of the night that Sabretasche had arrived in Paris, Violet Molyneux became his wife.

No empty conventionalities kept them apart; they cared nothing what the world wondered, nor how it talked; and they never thought of the malicious versions of their story, which were the one theme in Parisian salons. They went to the south of France for the whole of the coming year, to be away from that gay effervescing world of which both were weary; and, under the purple skies, in the golden

air, and amidst the luxurious solitudes of the Midi, shut out from those who had caressed, adored, and slandered him, far from the fret and hum and buz of outer life, Sabretasche surrendered himself to that love which gave him back the dreams of his lost youth, and even as night slinks away before the fullness of the dawn, so the shadows of his past fell behind him for evermore.

* * * * *

Sabretasche kept his promise. Alma never knew that it was to her own mother she had given charity after midnight mass at the doors of Notre Dame. All that had passed in that last interview with his dead wife, he told to Violet. To find in Alma the daughter of her own lover—that child whom she had hated with the fond, jealous vehemence with which a woman who loves hates all or anything that has any tie to, or connection with, her lover, or shows that another has been as near to him as she;—was intensely painful to her.

“Your child and *hers!*” she repeated. “I can never see her again! Do not ask me, I should never look upon her face without recalling her mother—the traitorous wife who could betray *you!*”

That was her first impulse; but her sense of justice conquered this. If she had never known her before, nothing on earth would have induced her to see the daughter of his dead wife; and he noticed the involuntary shudder with which she first met Alma, after his relation of her connection with himself; but she was too generous and too just to allow the feeling influence; and in truth, for I do not wish to claim for her any virtue she does not possess, she was too full of trembling gratitude at her own joy to bear a harsh thought to any soul on earth.

Bound by his promise to his wife, Sabretasche had been undecided whether or not to tell his daughter of the relation

there was between them. It was almost impossible to do so without letting her learn, at least in some degree, what her mother's character and life had been; her first questions so naturally would be about her mother, her dead mother, of whom she would be anxious to hear all. He had nothing to say but what would pain her; nothing but what would compel him to break his last promise to the dead. Moreover it would have seemed a useless cruelty to rend asunder the happy associations and belief of twenty years, to substitute in their stead, a parentage that must give her pain.

He felt himself also, no pleasure at the discovery, nor any sudden affection for her sprung up in the night like a mushroom, after the custom of men who find unknown daughters in romances, and are prepared to be devoted to them, good or bad, interesting or uninteresting, from the simple fact of their being their own children. On the contrary, to know that there was one living who bore in her the blood of the wife who had been his curse, was keenly painful to him; and he shrank from any remembrance or acknowledgment to the world, of her tie to himself. But, for De Vigne's sake, he had been interested in her before; and for this, he strove to conquer the repugnance that he felt to her from her mother; and wished to place her above the necessity of relying upon her talents, and to give her that position in the world, to which her adoption by Tresillian, as well as her relationship to himself, entitled her. To do this was difficult, without telling her what he wished to avoid; but he placed in Lord Molyneux's hands (to whom he told all) a sum, sufficient to maintain her in affluence, which, relying on her ignorance of law, could be given her as a remnant of the property of her grandfather, suddenly repaid by those who had swindled him of it. And Alma heard the Viscount's relation of her sudden inherit-

ance, unsuspecting that any other story was concealed behind it; she was too ignorant of all legal matters to detect any flaw there might be in the tale; she knew her grandfather had lost an immense fortune in the bank, and in speculation; she was not surprised a small portion should be recovered unexpectedly. Indeed, beyond thanking Lord Molyneux for having so kindly interested himself in her concerns, the subject occupied but few of her thoughts; for the moment that she had seen Sabretasche in the salons of the Molyneux hotel, and that he had recognised her kindly and courteously, she had asked him for De Vigne, and he had told her that he had been detained in Scutari, and would soon come home, through Paris.

"Is the curse of the marriage-tie to fall there, too?" thought Sabretasche. "How will it end for them both?"

It was early morning when De Vigne arrived in Paris.

Alma's letter had sent new life and strength into his veins; from that hour he recovered sufficiently to be moved on board the yacht of a man we knew, who, having come cruising about the Bosphorus, offered to give us a run to Marseilles. The sea air completed the recovery which her letter had begun; he lay on the deck smoking, and breathing in with the fresh Mediterranean wind his old health and strength, and by the time the "Sea-foam" ran into harbour he was himself again.

It was early morning when we reached Paris—a bright spring morning in May. After the discomfort, the dirt, the myriad disagreeables of Constantinople; after the mud and rain and snow and cheerlessness of the Crimea; how gay and pleasant looked those sunny streets of Paris, where primroses and violets, cassi and lemonade, were being cried; where Polichinelle was performing, and char-à-bancs starting with light-hearted students for a day in the Bois du Boulogne; and everywhere around us we heard chattering,

laughing, voluble, musical, that silvery, pleasant language as familiar to us as our own! What a contrast it was!—a contrast very agreeable, let a man be ever so *voué au tambour*, after nearly two years such campaigning as we had tasted in the Crimea!

I drove at once to the Gare de Strasbourg on my way to England; De Vigne remained in Paris; he had an oath of vengeance to work out; a purpose to be wrought, that in the old Pagan creed he held as righteous. And, to keep the vow which he had sworn, he went straight from the Station to the Rue Lafitte, to a house which stood near the Maison Dorée, and of which the various floors were let to various English bachelors whose *hivernages* were annually Paris.

Castleton sat in his chambers, smoking, breakfasting, reading the papers, and chatting with two of his particular chums, who had dropped in after keeping it up all the night through, in private salons of the Café Anglais. Castleton was hardly up to the mark that morning; he was annoyed and irritated at several things; first, that he had serious doubts as to the soundness of Lancer's off-leg, and if Lancer did not come in winner of the Derby, Lord Vane's prospects would look blacker than would be desirable; in the second, the Ministry had behaved with the grossest ingratitude, by refusing him, through his father, a certain post he coveted, a piece of ill-natured squeamishness on their part, as they had but lately given a deanery to his brother, a spirit rather worse than himself; in the fourth, a larger number of little bills were floating about than was pleasant, and if there were not speedily a general election, by which he could slip into one of those neat little boroughs that were honoured by being kept in his Grace of Tiara's pocket, he was likely to be troubled with more applications than he could, not alone

meet—of that he never thought—but stave off to some dim future era. Altogether, Castleton was not in an over-good humour that morning; had sworn at his valet, and lashed his terrier till it howled, and found everything at cross purposes and a bore, from his chocolate, which was badly milled, to the news he had lately heard, that the woman whose childish hand had struck him for a coward's deed, was in Paris with those who, if her lips revealed to them the outrage he had once attempted, would fearfully and bitterly avenge it on his head. So altogether things looked dark; and they looked no better when, on issuing from his chamber to go to the drag that awaited him in the street below, he came suddenly face to face with the man he hated and feared, because he was the man that Alma loved.

They met abruptly on the stairs as the one was quitting, the other approaching, the landing-place—they met abruptly, with barely a foot between them—De Vigne and Vane Castleton; he who had insulted her past all forgiveness, and he who would not have seen a hair of her head injured without revenging it. Involuntarily, they both stood silent for a moment. De Vigne looked at him, every vein a-flame with passion, recalling all that she had told him had been poured into her young ear in that horrible hour. His lips were pale, and set with a stern fixed purpose; his eyes burning with the hatred that was rioting within him; his right hand clenching hard on the riding-switch he held, as if he longed to change it into a deadlier and more dangerous weapon. He seemed to hear Castleton's hateful love-vows, and her piteous cry of terror and supplication; he seemed to see the loathsome caress with which he had dared to touch her lips; he seemed to feel her struggling, as if for life and death, in the vulture clutches of her hated foe! What wonder that his hand

clenched on his whip, as if thirsting for that surer and deadlier weapon with which, in other days, his grandsires had defended their honour and their love!

Castleton was no coward—had he been, the Tiara blood, bad though it might be in other ways, would have disowned him—yet at the eagle eyes that flashed so suddenly upon him, his own fell for an instant. But only *for* an instant; he recovered himself to have the first word, with a sneer on his lips and in his cold, light eyes:

“De Vigne! My dear fellow, how are you? Didn’t know you were in France. Come to rest yourself from that deuced hard campaign, eh?”

“No,” said De Vigne, between his teeth, which were set like a lion’s at sight of his foe. “I am come for a harder task—to try and teach a scoundrel what honour and dishonour mean!”

His tones were too significant to leave Castleton in any doubt as to the application of his words. He drew in his lips with a nervous, savage twitch. He laughed, with a forced sneer.

“Jealous! Are you come to bully me about that little girl of yours—what was her name—something with a Tre, I know? Really you will waste your wrath and your powder. I have nothing whatever to do with her; she did not take *me* in.”

The words had barely passed his lips before De Vigne’s grasp was on him, tight, firm, relentless; he might with as much use have tried to escape from the iron jaws of a tiger seeking his prey, as from the grasp of the man who loved the woman he had insulted. De Vigne’s face was white with passion, his eyes burning with fiery anger, the wrath that was in him quivering and thrilling in every vein and sinew—to hear her name on that liar’s

lips. He seized him in his iron grasp, and shook him like a little dog.

"Blackguard! that is the last of your dastard lies you shall ever dare to utter! You are too low for the revenge one man of honour takes upon another; you are only fit to be punished as one punishes a yelping mongrel or a sneaking hound!——"

Holding him there, powerless, in the grip of his left hand, he thrashed him with his riding-switch as a man would thrash a cur—thrashed him with all the passion that was in him, till the little whip snapped in two. Then he lifted him up as one would lift a dead rat or a broken bough, and threw him down the whole stone flight of the staircase: in his wrath, he seemed to have the strength of a giant.

Castleton lay at the foot of the stairs, stunned and insensible. His valet and the people of the house gazed on the scene, too amazed to interrupt it or aid him. His two friends standing in the street criticising the roars in his drag, rushed in at the echo of the fall. De Vigne stepped over his body, giving it a spurn with his foot as he passed.

"The deuce, De Vigne!" began one of them. "What's up—what's amiss?"

De Vigne laughed—a haughty sneer upon his face:

"Only a little lesson given to your friend, Lord Monckton. Few will disagree with me in thinking it wanted; if they do, I can be heard of at the Hôtel de Londres. Good day to you!"

As he walked out into the street to his horse, which was waiting for him, a small, sleek, fair man came up to him with a deferential ceremoniousness.

"I beg your pardon, Major, for intruding; but might

"I be allowed to inquire whether you received a letter from me when you were before Sebastopol?"

De Vigne signed him away with the broken handle of his whip:

"When I discharge my servants, I do not expect to be followed and annoyed with their impertinence."

"I mean no impertinence, Major," persisted the man, "and I should not be likely to intrude upon you without some warrant, sir. Did you read my letter?"

"Read it? Do you suppose I read the begging-letters with which rogues pester me? It is no use to waste your words here. Take yourself off!"

He spoke haughtily and angrily, as he put his foot in the stirrup; he remembered the share Raymond, then in Castleton's employ, had taken in that vile plot, but he could not degrade her by bringing her name up to a servant, and lower himself by stooping to resent the mere hired villany of Castleton's abettor.

"It was not a begging-letter, Major. It would have told you something of great importance to you, sir, if you had chosen to read it."

"Silence!" said De Vigne, as he threw himself across the saddle, shook the bridle from his grasp, and rode away up the Rue Lafitte, turning towards the hotel in the Champs Elysées, whence that letter, he had returned unread, he remembered had been dated by Alma, and bestowing no more thought on his quondam valet, in the passion that still flamed in him, despite his vengeance.

He could have slain Castleton, the man who would have robbed him of his one earthly treasure; who *had* robbed him of her for two years. He could have slain him, the man who had polluted her name by association with his; who had dared to profane those young lips

with his loathed and brutal caresses. He could have slain him, as Moses slew the Egyptian, in the fiery wrath and hatred of the moment; but he refrained, as David refrained from slaying Saul, when the man who had wronged him lay in his power, sleeping and defenceless, in the still gloom of midnight. Oh! mes frères, virtue lies not, as some think, in being too pure for temptation to enter into us, but rather in proportion to the strength of the seduction and the power of the temptation we resist. If there be such to whom like temptation never come, happy for them, their path through life is safe and easy. If they never know the delicious perfume of the rose-garland, they never know the bitterness of the fennel and amaranth; yet closer to human sympathies and dearer to human hearts—nobler, warmer, more natural—is the man who loves and hates, errs, struggles, and repents; is quick to joy and quick to pain; who sins in haste, but is ever ready to atone, and who, though passing through the fire of his own thoughts, comes like gold worthier from the furnace.

Vane Castleton rose from that fall, sunk and degraded for ever. He had been thrashed by De Vigne as a hound by its keeper; he knew that stigma would cling to him as long as he lived. Monckton, his valet, his groom, the people of the house, had all seen it; seen him powerless in De Vigne's grasp; seen him held and lashed, like a yelping puppy in a hunting-field. The tale would be told in circles of all classes; it would spread like wildfire. No food so dear to the generality as gossip—above all, gossip spiced with scandal—it would be known in his club, in his clique, all over town. Monckton lost no time in detailing, at the Circle, how “that dare-devil De Vigne pitched into poor Vane. Some row about a woman, I don't know who; but I can swear

to the severity of the thrashing; and he kicked him afterwards, by Jove! he did. Somebody should send it to the papers!"

Alma was amply revenged. Castleton's debts, his difficulties, his bad odour in general, crowned by the story of a horsewhipping that he did not dare *revenge*, made it impossible to stay, cut by every man worth knowing: all his daily haunts, filled by old acquaintances, who either dropped him entirely, or shook him off as plainly as they could; every house where he was wont to dine or lounge away his hours, full of the story; Paris and London closed as effectually as though everybody had ostracised him. He did not wait his ostracism, but fearful lest law should take further cognisance of his attempted evil deed, slunk out of Paris before nightfall. He now usually lives about the Bads; his society is not what one of the ducal house of Tiara might reasonably expect, and they tell me there is no more dangerous hand at trapping young pigeons, and fleecing them of all their valuable feathers. It is rather an unworthy office for one of his order, but nature will out, and it will have the best of the game, and so—Vane Castleton, with a great name, a good position, and every chance to make fair running in the race of life if he had chosen; born with the nature of the bully, and the sharper in him, sank at last, despite all, to their level.

Arrived at the hotel in the Champs Elysées, De Vigne found, to his amazement, that it was Lord Molyneux's, and was told, in words which were black letter to him, that Mademoiselle Tressillian was not there, but had gone to the Duchesse de La Vieillecour's villa, the Diaman du Forêt, at Fontainebleau; "every one knew the villa; Monsieur would be certain to find it; and Made-

moiselle had left word that her address was to be given to anyone who called." With which assurance the porter returned to his plate of onion soup inside his den; and De Vigne, bewildered, rode on to the *Gare* for Fontainebleau.

Minutes seemed to him hours; the train appeared to creep along its weary ironway; everything was strange to him. Her close acquaintance with the Molyneux appeared inexplicable. The letter that vowed her love to him had been written nearly two years before. Since then she might have changed; she might have loved some other; she might even have pledged herself to another man? He tortured himself with every form of dread and doubt, as the train dragged on till it stopped at Fontainebleau, the sun shining on the quiet French town, on the stately historic castle, on the deep majestic woods that saw the loves of Henri Quatre, the beauty of Gabrielle d'Estrées, the death of the grand Condé, and the despair of the man who, abandoned alike by his Courtiers whom he had ennobled, his Marshals whom he had created, and his People whom he had rescued from the bloody fangs of The Terror, signed the act of his abdication in his favourite palace, where that child was baptized who has lived to restore his name and to ascend his throne.

The train stopped, and he went at once to the Hôtel de la Ville de Lyon, where, fifteen or sixteen years before, he remembered giving a brilliant dinner to Rose Luilhier, then first dancer of the Opéra, a gay, flippant little blonde, whom he had driven round, in a four-in-hand, by the Carrefour des Boux and Franchard to see the Roche qui Pleure, and had drunk champagne and sung Béranger songs, and enjoyed his Bacchanalia with

all the joyous, careless revelry of spirits undamped and unwearied.

Now, Rose Luillhier was a faded, ugly, broken-down woman, who, falling through a trap-door, and ruining her beauty for ever, had been glad to keep a Mont de Piété in a small way, in a dingy, dark, loathsome hole in the Faubourg d'Enfer; and he—he dared not trust his present; he dared not look at his future!

He inquired the way to Madame de La Vieillecour's maison de plaisance. It lay on the other side of the forest, to the south-west, they told him, and they had not a carriage left in the coach-house, nor a horse in the stable, there were so many pleasure parties to the forest or the palace in this month. He went to the Londres, to the Nord, to the Aigle Noir, to the Lion d'Or; all their conveyances were hired. It was a saint's day and a holiday in Paris, and numerous parties of every grade, had come to spend the sweet spring-hours in the leafy shades, and majestic *futaie*, of Fontainebleau. He went to Nargein's and to Bernard's, in the Rue de France; but he could find no conveyance there. Impatient of delay, he asked how far it was to walk.

"Mais à peu près sept kilomètres, monsieur," said the man of whom he inquired. "Voyez donc, monsieur! Vous partirez par la Barrière de Paris, suivrez le chemin de chasse jusqu'à la Batte des Aires, prendrez le sentier jusqu'au forêt du Gros Fouteau, après cela le sentier de l'Amitié, et aux Gorges de la Solle, monsieur——"

De Vigne heard no more of the Frenchman's voluble and bewildering directions; a fierce oath broke from him under his breath, as three carriages swept past him. In the first sat a young Parisian *lion*, and—the woman who called herself his Wife! From under her parasol in pink silk and lace, as she leaned forward, full-blown, high-

coloured, coarse, with a smile on her lips, and that vindictive triumph in her cruel eyes which he knew so well, he saw her face—that face unseen for eleven long years, since the day he had thrown her from him in the chapel of Vigne. He knew her in an instant, despite every alteration—and they were not few that time had made—and faint and sick, he reeled against the wall of Nargein's dwelling.

The Trefusis, the woman whom he so unutterably loathed, so fiercely hated! Was it prophetic that this fiend should for ever stand between him and the better angel of his life! She knew him, too, for she started visibly; then she leant forward and bowed to him, with a cruel, mocking, leering smile.

"Who's that fine man, *ma belle?*" asked Anatole de Beauvoisier.

"My husband!" answered the Trefusis, with her coarse, harsh laugh.

Anatole had a great admiration for this handsome English woman, yet he estimated her rightly enough to murmur to himself, "Poor devil! Don't I pity him!"

A deadly sickness came over De Vigne, and a fierce ungovernable thirst for vengeance on her entered into him. He hated her so unspeakably! That woman who stood an eternal bar between him, and love, and peace and honour!

He broke from Nargein's foreman with a hasty dour, and took the route by the Barrière de Paris, trusting to memory to lead him across the forest, in the direction of the Diaman du Forêt. He followed the hunting-path that leads to the magnificent forest of the Grand Fouteau. It was now after noon, and the soft golden sunlight turned to bronze the giant bolls of the old oaks. All around him was hushed in the heart of

the great royal forest; and the birds were singing in the dense foliage of those shadowy avenues, that had used to echo with the bay of hounds, the ring of horses' hoofs, the mellow notes of hunting calls, when through their sunny glades the gay courtiers of Valois, Navarre, and Bourbon had ridden for the pleasure of the Chasse and the Curée. All was silent around him, save for the musical murmur, nameless yet distinguishable, as of the coming summer breathing its life and spirit into the tender leaves, the waving grasses, and the waters of lake and fountain, long chilled and silenced by the iron touch of the past winter. He strode along through the hunting-path, edged on one side with brushwood and on the other with the great forest trees, only thinking sufficiently of the way he went to take the paths that bore to the north-west, and struck into the Fulaci du Gros Fouteau, knowing that, by keeping to his left, he should come upon the road to Chailly, brushing his way hastily through the tangled forest-branches that had stood the sunshine and the storm of centuries. As he swung along, he glanced upwards to put aside the boughs; and—with an inarticulate cry, sprang forward.

Half sitting, half lying on the fallen trunk of a beech that had been struck by lightning a few days before, the sunshine falling down through the thick branches on her, he saw once more the woman he loved!

In another moment she was on his heart, clinging there as if no earthly power should ever part them, weeping and laughing in her agony of gladness, while he held her in his embrace, crushing her against his breast, their long caresses more eloquent than words. Then Alma raised her face to his, flushing with a bright rich glow, her arms clinging closer and closer round him;

"You do not doubt me now? You will never leave me—never?"

"Never, my God!" And as he poured out upon her in his kisses the passion which words were too cold and tame to utter, he forgot—utterly, entirely—that cold, cruel, jeering face which had passed him but an hour before; and—forgot, also, the ties that bound him.

Their joy was too deep for tranquillity; all she cared for was to look up into his eyes; all he cared for was to drink of the fresh sweet waters of human affection; to lavish on the only thing he loved all the pent-up well-springs of his heart; to hold her there close—close, so that none could come to rob him of her a second time—the one lost to him for so long!

Do you wonder at him? Go and travel in Sahara, across that great, dreary, blinding, shadowless, hopeless plain of glaring yellow sand, where you see no living thing save the vulture whirling aloft awaiting some dead camel ere it can make its loathsome feast; travel with the thirst of the desert upon you, your throat parching, your eyes starting, your whole frame quivering with longing for the simple drop of water which your fellows fling away unvalued. When you came to the clear cool springs flowing under the friendly shadows of the banyans and the palms; would you have the courage to turn away and leave the draught untasted, and go back alone into the desert to die?

It was long before they could speak of what they had both suffered, when at last she told him all, more fully than her letter had done, of Castleton's brutality, the dark fierce blood surged over his brow, and in his teeth he muttered a fierce oath.

"By Heaven! I wish I had not let him go with life!"

"What are you saying?" she whispered.

He kissed the lips he would not answer:

"Do not ask! To think that dastard villain dared to lay his hand upon you wakes crime in me! My darling, my precious one! to think that brute should have ventured to lure you in his hateful toils, should have polluted your ears with his loathsome vows, should have dared to touch your little hand with his——"

He stopped; his fierce anger overmastered him. To think the dastard love, which was poison to any woman, should have been breathed on *her*, on whom he would have had the summer wind never play too rudely; to think that his hated kiss should have ventured to touch those soft warm lips, pure as ungathered rose-leaves, which were consecrated wholly to himself!

"Do not grieve at it!" whispered Alma, caressingly. "Do not think of it. Now I have *you* I could pardon anything. When life is beautiful and God's mercy great, one cannot harbour hard thoughts of any one? It is when we *suffer* that we could revenge."

He pressed her closer to his heart:

"You are better than I, my little one!"

"No!" she murmured passionately, "I am better than none; still less than you, noble as you are in thought and in deed, in heart and in soul. Ah! I loved and revered you before; but since your courage, your suffering, your daring, I love you more dearly, I reverence you more sacredly than ever, my love, my lord, my husband!"

As the last words fell on his ear, De Vigne started as at a mortal wound from the steel! That title from her lips struck him keenly, bitterly as any sword-thrust! To have to tell her he had deceived her, to have to give a death-blow to this unsuspecting confidence, this radiant,

shadowless happiness with which she clung to him, as if, now they were together, life had brought her heaven upon earth; to have to quench the light in her sunny eyes, and tell her that another called him by that name!

The hand that held both hers trembled: the glow faded off his face; his heart turned sick; how could he tell her that for two long years the secret of his life had been withheld from her—that, married, he had gone to her as a free man—that, bound himself, he had won her love—that he had gone on from day to day, from week to week, with that fatal tie unacknowledged, that dark and cruel secret unconfessed? And she looked up in his face, as she clung to him, with such a world of worship, such eager joy in her brilliant, loving eyes, that seemed never to weary of gazing into his! And he had to say to her: "Your trust is unmerited! I have deceived you!"

Unconsciously the woman, who would have perilled her life to save him a single pang, struck a yet sharper blow to the just-opened wound! Noticing the gloom that gathered in his eyes, to dispel it, she laughed, with her old gay childlike insouciance:

"Yes! in one thing I *am* better than you; I have more faith! You could think evil of me, but I never dreamt of doubting *you*. I would have disbelieved angels had they come to witness against you; in your absence none should dare to slander you to me; and if they had brought proofs of every force under the sun, I would have thrown them in their teeth as falsehoods and as forgeries, if they had stained *your* honour!"

She spoke, her rich low voice thrilling with that eloquence which always came to her when roused to deep

emotion or to warm excitement. Yet—every one of those noble and tender words quivered like a knife in his heart! He bent his head till his brow rested on her hair; and the man, whose iron nerves had not quailed, nor pulse beat one shade quicker, before the deadly flame blazing from the thirty guns at Balaklava, shuddered as he thought, "How can I tell her that I have deceived her!"

"Stop, stop—for the love of Heaven," he muttered, "or you will kill me!"

He felt his heart would break, his brain give way, if she said another word to add to the coals of fire she was heaping on his head! Her unconscious gladness, her noble faith, seemed to brand his soul with shame and suffering, which years would never have power to efface;—to have to answer her with what would quench and darken all her glad and generous faith, and, for aught he knew, turn her from him for ever.

Startled and terrified, she tried to look into his face; but his head was bent, so that she could see nothing save the blue veins swelling on his forehead.

"What have I said—what have I done?" she cried, piteously. "Speak to me, answer me, for Heaven's sake!"

He did not answer her. What could he say? The veins on his temples grew like cords, and over his face stole that dead, gray pallor which had overspread it upon his marriage day. A vague and horrible terror came upon the woman who loved him. She threw her arms round his neck; she pressed her warm lips to his forehead, pale and lined with the bitter thoughts in his brain; she only thought of him then, never of herself.

"Tell me, what *have* I said—I, who would give my life to spare you the slightest pain?"

He seized her in his arms; he pressed her against his heart, throbbing to suffocation:

"My worshipped darling! do not speak gently to me! Hate me! Curse me! . . . That woman—who came to you—*is* my wife!"

It was told at last—the stain on his name, the curse on his life, the secret kept so long! Her face was raised to his; its fair bloom changed to his own bloodless and lifeless pallor, her eyes wide open, with a vague, amazed horror in them. She scarcely understood what he had said; she could not realise it in the faintest shadow.

"Your wife!" she repeated, mechanically, after him. "*Your wife!* You are jesting, you are trying me;—it is not true!"

He held her closer to him, and rested his lips on her hair; he could not bear to see those fond, frank eyes gaze into his with that pitiful terror, that haunting, pleading earnestness, which would not believe even his own words against him!

"God forgive me, it *is* true!"

With a cry that rang through the forest silence, she bowed down before the blow dealt to her by the hand that she loved best. She did not weep, like most women, but the blood rushed to her face, then left it white and colourless as death. She pressed her hand upon her heart, struggling for breath, looking up in his face as a spaniel that its master had slain would look up in his, the love outliving and pardoning the death-blow.

For the moment he thought he had killed her. In an insanity of anguish he called upon her name; he covered her blanched lips with kisses; he vowed to God that he loved her dearer than any husband ever loved his wife; that he hated the woman who bore his name, whom he had left from the very altar! He called her

his own, his love, his darling; he swore never to leave her while his life lasted; he besought her, if ever she had cared for him, to look at him, and tell him she forgave him!

She did not shrink from, but clung to, him, breathless, trembling, quivering with pain, like a delicate animal after a cruel blow.

"Forgive you! Yes! What would *I* not forgive! But——"

Her voice broke down in convulsive sobs, and she lay in his arms weeping unrestrainedly, with all the force and vehemence of her nature; while he bowed his head over her, and his own bitter, scorching tears fell on her golden hair. He let her weep on and on. He could not speak to her; he could only clasp her to him, murmuring broken earnest words of agonised remorse.

Once she looked up at him with those radiant eyes, from which he had quenched the light and glory:

"You do not love her? You cannot!"

There was her old vehemence in the question—as passionately he answered her:

"Love her! Great Heaven! no word could tell how I *hate* her; how I have hated her ever since that cursed day when she first took my name, to stain it and dishonour it. My precious one! my hate for her is as great as my love for you; greater it cannot be!"

"And yet—she is your wife! O God, have pity on us!"

Her lips turned white as if in bodily pain, her eyes closed, and she shivered as with great cold.

He pressed her against his heart; great drops of suffering stood upon his brow. It was an agony greater than death to him to see the misery on her face, and to know that he had brought it there—he who would have

sheltered her from every chill breath, guarded her from every touch of the sorrow common to all human kind!

"Would to Heaven I had died before my selfish passions brought my curse on your young head," he muttered, as he bent over her. "You forgive me—but you cannot love me after I have deceived you! You cannot love me, false as I have been to truth and honour! God knows I meant no deliberate wrong. I never sought you as libertines will seek. I never knew I loved you till the day I spoke my love—the day we parted! I had gone on and on, without thinking that I lived a lie! You cannot love me after this;—nor pity me, though I have sunk so low?"

Breathless he waited for her answer—breathless and trembling, his face white as hers, his haughty lips quivering, his head bent and humbled, as he made the hardest, yet the noblest confession a proud man can ever make—"*I was wrong!*"

She lifted her face to his, in the first bitterness of her grief her thought was of him and not of herself.

"Love you? I *must* while my life lasts. Nothing could change me to you; if you were to err, to alter, to fall as low as man can fall, if all the world stoned and hooted you, I would cling the closer to you, and we would defy it, or endure it—*together!*"

She spoke with her old vehemence, her arms twining close about his neck, her lips soft and warm against his cheek, her eyes gazing up into his, brilliant with the love that was the life of her life; then—the passion faded from her eyes, the glow from her face; with a convulsive sob her head drooped upon her breast, and she fell forward on his arm, weeping hopelessly, wearily, agonisedly, as women in the Crimea wept over their husband's graves.

"God help me! I do not know what I say! If I am wrong, tell me; if I sin, slay me—but cease to love you I *cannot!*"

CHAPTER XVI.

The Crowning Temptation of a Tempted Life.

IN a few broken, earnest words, De Vigne told her the history of that fatal marriage-bond which had cost his mother's life, stained his name, banished him from his home, cursed his life with a bitter and futile regret, and now brought misery on a life dearer than his own. And it touched him deeply to see, as she listened to his story, how utterly her own sorrow was merged into her grief for *him*; her misery at all he suffered in his cruel bondage; her loathing at the thought of all he had borne for those long years, in even nominal connexion with such as his wife was. It touched him deeply to see how her *own* wrongs faded away unremembered in her grief for *him*, and she was more dear, more dangerous to him in that hour of suffering, than in her gayest, sweetest, or most bewitching moments.

Wrapt in that silent communion, absorbed in the bitterness in which the first hours of their reunion were steeped, neither heard a footfall on the forest turf, nor saw the presence of one, who, drawing near them, looked on the completion of that vengeance which had struck its first blow so many years before, and now came to deal its last. They neither saw nor heard her, till her chill, coarse, harsh tones stirred the sweet, soft air.

"Miss Tressillian, two years ago you chose to disbelieve, or feign to disbelieve, my claims upon your lover. Ask Major De Vigne now, in my presence, if

he can dare to deny that I am his lawful and wedded wife?"

With a cry of horror, Alma looked up. With a fierce oath he sprang to his feet, standing at last face to face, as he had stood at the marriage-altar with the woman whom the Church and Law had made his wife. Thus they met at last in the silent aisles of the forest; thus they met at last, those two fierce foes whom the marriage-laws assumed to hold as "two whom God had joined together!" And she stood looking at him with a cruel laugh, a leering triumph in her eyes, a devilish sneer upon her lip, hating him still with a chill and ceaseless hate; while he gazed down upon her as men gazed upon the loathsome and accursed sight of the Lamia, while between them, clinging to his arm in terror, as if to shield him from the hatred of his deadliest enemy, was the woman he loved. On the one hand, the vile mistress who had cursed his life; on the other, the better angel, which had nestled in his heart to touch all its deeper chords, and waken all its purer love.

The Trefusis looked at him, and smiled; a smile that chilled his blood as the cold gleam of a dagger in the moonlight, chills the blood of a man, waking from sweet dreams to find himself fettered and bound in the clutches of his most cruel foe.

"Ask him, Miss Tressillian!" she said again. "You disbelieved me. See if Granville de Vigne, who in bygone days used to boast very grandly of his truth and honour, dare tell you a lie before my face, and say that I am *not* his Wife."

Cold, swift, and haughty, rushed the words to Alma's lips, with the scorn and fire latent in her Southern nature.

"He would not lower himself so far to your level,

as even to conceal the truth. I know all!—and if the sorrow be his, the shame of his marriage rests solely upon you.”

She laughed, that coarse, harsh laugh which, with many other of the traces of her origin and her innate vulgarity, had crept out since, her aim attained, she had flung off that uncongenial gloss and varnish of refinement which she had assumed to lure her prey.

“You take the high hand, young lady! Well, you are wise to make the most of a bad bargain; and since you cannot be his wife, to pretend it is the more honourable post to be his mistress! I wish you joy; his love has ever been so very famous for its constancy!”

“Woman! silence!” broke in De Vigne, and even the Trefusis paused for the moment, and shrank from the lurid fire flashing from his eyes, the dark wrath gathered in his face. “Dare to breathe another of your brutal insults in her ear, and I swear your sex shall not shield you from my vengeance. You have wronged *me* enough. Your ribald jests shall never soil her purity! My love, my darling!” he whispered passionately, bowing his head over Alma, who still clung unconsciously to his arm, her colour changing, her face full of horror, terror, loathing, at the first coarse words that had ever been spoken to her—that had ever breathed to her of shame! “do not heed her; do not listen to her. She is a bold, bad woman. O God, forgive me! that I should have brought you to this!”

“Purity!” re-echoed the Trefusis, with her cold loud laugh. “Since when has that new idol had any attraction for you? In bygone days if the external pleased your senses, I never knew you care for over-cleanliness of mind and character! How long have you begun to learn platronics? The rôle will hardly suit you long, I

fancy. If this pretty child likes to be added to the string of your cast-off loves, it is no concern of mine, though you *are* my husband."

His face grew white as death; he forced to stand by and hear what he worshipped, insulted thus! With a fierce gesture, forgetful of her sex, he would have struck her in his wrath, his grief, his insulted pride, his maddened anguish; but Alma caught his arm:

"*For my sake——*"

"The low words, the touch of her hand, the sight of her upraised face, stood between him and his passion as no other thing on earth would have done. For "her sake" his arm dropped. The dark blood surged over his brow; and he put his hand upon his breast, as he had done at the marriage-altar, to keep down the storm of passions raging in his heart.

"Out of my sight, out of my sight," he muttered in his teeth, "or by God I shall do what you will wish to your dying day undone!"

Something in the grand wrath of this tempestuous and fiery nature awed and stilled even her; a dogged sullenness overspread her face; she was foiled and mastered, and for the first time her revenge was wrested from her grasp. She could not turn what he now loved from him.

At that minute light laughter, lighter footsteps, low, gay voices, broke on their ear, and through the beech-boughs of the Gros Fouteau came Madame de La Vieillecour and her party. The Duchess recognised De Vigne with surprise; she saw, moreover, that they arrived at an untimely season on a painful scene; but coming forward with her hands outstretched, she welcomed him home with pleasant fluent words of congratulation.

It was well for him that he had learnt, long years

before, the first lesson society gives its pupils: to smile when their hearts are breaking, to wear a tranquil, unmoved air while the vultures gnaw at their life-strings; or he could hardly have answered the new comers, while the stormy passions just aroused in all their fullest strength, raged and warred in his heart; while on the one side stood the woman he loved, on the other the wife he loathed!

"Come back to dine with us," continued Madame de La Vieillecour; "the carriages are waiting. Alma, ma belle, you look ill; you are tired, and the sun has been too hot."

She turned away with her gay party, talking to De Vigne, who instinctively followed, when suddenly on his ear the clear, cold, hard tones of the Trefusis (at whom, since his last words, he had not glanced, and whom Madame de La Vieillecour had not observed in the twilight of the forest, which was growing dark, now that the sun had set) hissed through the air, arresting all:

"Granville, may I trouble you for a few words before you leave? I thought it was not usual for a husband to accept an invitation before his wife's face, in which she was not included!"

The Duchess turned quickly; the harsh and rapid English was lost on the rest of the party, but she, despite all her tact and high breeding, stared, first at the speaker, then at De Vigne.

"Mais!—quelle est donc cette femme!"

He did not hear her; he had swung round, his face, even to his lips, white with passion. Careless of all observers, Alma clasped both hands upon his arm:

"Do not go," she whispered. "Come with me. Do not stay with her, if you love me!"

For once he was deaf to her prayer; his lips quivered in torture—to have that woman, bold, bad, low, hateful, all he knew her to be, stand there and claim him as her husband! “A few words with me!” he muttered deliriously. “Yes; we will have a few more words! By Heaven, they shall be such as you will remember to your grave.”

Alma clung to his arm, breathless, trembling, blanched with fear. “If you love me, do not stay! She will madden you, she will goad you to some crime! leave her to do her worst. She is beneath your vengeance!”

For the first time he was deaf to her entreaties—for the first time he would not listen to her voice. He put her hands off his arm, and answered her in the same low tone:

“I will rejoin you. Fear nothing from me: in all I do and say while my life lasts, I shall remember *you*. Go!”

He spoke gently, but too firmly for her to resist him, and turned to the Duchess.

“Allow me, Madame, to speak a few words with this person? I will rejoin you. You do not dine till nine?”

“No. I will leave horses for you at the entrance of the Gros Fouteau—au revoir!”

Certain indistinct memories arose in the Duchess’s mind of a story her brother, little Curly, had told her, long ago, of some unhappy and ill-assorted marriage which De Vigne had made; and she rapidly guessed all the truth. They went; a turn hid them from sight, and De Vigne was alone with his wife, in the twilight deepening around them. For a moment neither spoke. Perhaps the memory was too strong in both of twelve years before, when they had stood thus, face to face, before

the marriage-altar, to take the marriage-vows—on one side a lie and a fraud, on the other a curse life-long and inexorable.

Alma knew him aright—this woman maddened him. She had set light to all the hottest passions in him, and they now flared and raged far beyond power of his to still them. His loathing for one who only bore his name to dishonour it, and only used the tie of wife to torture and insult him, overmastered reason and self-control, and unloosed the bonds of all that was darker and most dangerous in his character.

She looked at him and laughed, with that coarse sneer which had been on her lips when she signed her name in the chapel at Vigne.

“So! Granville de Vigne, we have met at last! You have found my promised revenge! no child’s play, no absurd bombast, as you fancied it, eh? You are my husband, *my husband* ‘until death us shall part.’ Do you remember the sweet words of the marriage service that bound us together for life? I have driven you from your home; I have made the memory of your mother weigh on you with the weight of murder; I have cheapened your name to the world and made it hateful to you; I stand a bar, as long as you and I shall live, to your peace and happiness. You laughed once when I vowed to be revenged on you; you can hardly laugh at it now!”

“Silence! fiend incarnate!” burst from De Vigne, the mad agony in him breaking bounds. “Oh! wretch, divorced in truth, from the day we stood together at the altar, evil enough I have done to God and man, but not enough to be cursed with you.” . . .

She laughed again—that coarse and brutal laugh which thrilled through his every nerve.

"No doubt you hate me hotly enough! You want your freedom, De Vigne. You want to wash off the stain from your name. You want to go back to your lordly home without my memory poisoning the air. You want your liberty, if only on the old plea for which you used to want all things that were not easy to get, because it is unattainable. Of course you hate me! Perhaps that gold-haired child whom I found you weeping over so pathetically, finding mere love an unprofitable connexion, wants to work on you to put your freedom in *her* hands, and you would fain be quit of me, to pay down the same price again for a new passion——".

With a fierce spring De Vigne seized her in his grasp, crushing her as in an iron vice.

"Dare to say one word of her again, and I shall forget your sex! Let her alone, I tell you, or by Heaven it may be worse for you than you ever dream!"

She quailed before the passion in his voice, the strength of the grip in which he held her. But her fiendish delight in goading him to fury outweighed her fear. She laughed again:

"Sullied! polluted! I fancy your protection will do that more completely than my pity, especially when you select for your innamorata one of Vane Castleton's forsaken loves!"

An oath, so fierce, that it startled even her, stopped her in her jeering slander. The boiling oil was flung upon the seething flames, lashing them into fury. He was stung past all endurance, and the insult to the woman whom he knew as stainless as the virgin snow, goaded him to insanity; he neither knew nor cared in that moment what he did; the blood surged over his brain, and flamed in his veins like molten fire; he gripped her in his grasp as a tiger his prey.

"Woman, silence! Would to God you were of my sex, that I could wreak such vengeance on you as you should carry to the grave."

Her fierce and cruel eyes laughed into his in the dull gray twilight, with leering triumph over the misery she caused.

"It is a pity there are laws as inexorable on murder as on marriage! You would not be the first husband who killed his wife when he fell in love with another woman——"

She stopped, stricken with sudden awe and fear, at the passion she had stung, and tortured, into being. As the iron gripe of his hands clenched harder and harder upon her, for the first time it flashed upon her that she was *in his power*—the power of the man she had so bitterly wronged, and whom she had now goaded on to reckless fury and despair! She knew his fiery passions—she knew his lion-like strength—she knew his long and unavenged wrongs; and she trembled, and shivered, and turned pale in his relentless grasp, for she was in his hands, and had aroused a tempest she knew not how to allay.

"Wretch, accursed! if you tempt me to wash out my wrongs, and slay you where you stand, your blood will be on your own head!"

His voice, as it hissed out in the horrible whisper, sounded strange even to his own ear, his brain thrilled and throbbed, flashes of fire danced before his eyes, through which he saw, cruel and hateful, the face of his temptress—of his wife! The pale heavens whirled around him, the giant forms of the forest trees seemed dark and ghastly shapes. His grasp tightened and tightened on her; she had no strength against him; her life was in his power, that life which only existed to do

him hideous wrong; that life which stood an eternal bar between him and love, and peace, and honour; that one human life which stood barring him out from all he coveted, and which in one flash of time he could snap, and still, and destroy for ever from his path, which its presence so long had cursed.

They were alone, shrouded and sheltered in the solitude of the coming night; in that dense forest, there were no eyes to see, no ears to listen, no voices to whisper whatever might be done under the cover of those silent beechwood shades.

That horrible hour of temptation!—coming on him when, with every passion stung to madness, his blood glowed ready to receive the poison! The night was still around them, there was not a sound save the sigh of the leaves; not a thing to look upon them, save the little crescent moon and the stars, which were arising slowly one by one. Night and Solitude—twin tempters—gathered round him; his heart stood still, his brain was on fire, his eyes blind and dizzy; alone, out of the gray and whirling haze around him he saw her mocking, fiendish gaze, and the voice of a fell Temptation whispered in his ear, “Her life is in your hands, revenge yourself. Wash out the stain upon your name, win back the liberty you crave, efface the loathsome insults on the woman you love. She stands between you and the heaven you crave—take the life that destroys your own. For your love she gave you fraud; for your trust betrayal; for your name, disgrace. Avenge it! Is it not just? One blow, never heard, and never known by any mortal thing, and you have freedom back, and love!”

His brain reeled; his grasp tightened and tightened upon her, too strong for her to have power or movement left. The night whirled around him, the pale blue skies

grew crimson as with blood, the great gnarled trunks of the trees seemed to mock and grin like horrid spirits, goading him to evil, his passions surged in madness through his veins; and clear and ghastly he seemed to hear a tempter's voice: "Avenge your wrongs, and you are free!"

With a cry to God, a throe of agony, he flung the fell allurements from him, and threw her from his grasp. "Devil, temptress! thank your God, not me, I have not murdered you to-night!" She lay where he had thrown her, stunned, less by the fall than by the terror of the moment past—that moment of temptation which had seemed eternity to both. She lay there motionless, and he fled from her—fled as men flee from death or capture—fled from that crime which had lured him so nearly to its deadly brink; which so nearly had cursed and haunted his life with the relentless terror, the hideous weight, of a human life, silenced and shattered by his hand, lain by his deed in its grave, sent by his will from its rightful place and presence in the living, laughing earth, into the dark and deadly mysteries of the tomb.

He fled from the hideous temptation which had assailed him in that hour of madness—he fled from the devil of Opportunity to which so many sins are due, and from whose absence so many virtues date: flinging it away from him with a firm hand, not daring to stay to test his strength by pausing in its presence. He fled on and on, in the twilight gloom, through the trembling leaves, and evening shadows; he fled on under the gaunt boughs and tangled aisles of the woodland; dark passions warring and rioting within him. Dizzy with the whirling of his brain, every nerve strung to tension, and quivering and throbbing with the fierce torture of the ordeal past, he sank down at last as one whom the

bloodhounds have chased, half conscious, on the cool fresh turf, with a cry of agony and thanksgiving: "My God! my God! I thank thee that my hands are stainless from this sin!"

The silver scimitar of the young moon rose over the forest, the twilight deepened, and the night came down on Fontainebleau, veiling town and woodland, lake and palace, in its soft and hallowing light; still he lay there, exhausted with the conflict; worn out with that fell struggle with temptation, where submission had been so easy, victory so hard. And as the twilight shadows deepened round him, and the dews gathered thicker, and the numberless soft voices of the night chimed through the silent forest glades, he thanked God that his heart was free, his hands stainless, from the guilt, which, if never known by his fellow-men, would yet have haunted him with its horrible presence throughout his life, poisoned the purest air he breathed, turned the fairest heaven that smiled on him into a hell, waked him from his sweetest sleep to start and shudder at the chill touch of remembered crime, and cursed his dying bed with a horror that would have pursued him to the very borders of his grave. He thanked God that for once in his life he had resisted the mad temptation of the hour, and thrust away the evil of Thought ere it had had time to fester into Deed; he thanked God that the dead weight of a human life was not upon his soul, to rise and drive him, Orestes-like, from every haven of rest, to damn him in his softest hours of joy, to make him shrink from the light of heaven, and tremble at the rustle of the trees, and quail before the innocent and holy beauty of the earth crimsoned with his guilt. He thanked God that he could meet the innocent eyes of the woman he loved without a secret on his soul; that he could take her

hands without staining them with the guilt on his; that he could hold her to his heart, without the deadly presence of that crime between them with which, to win her, he would have darkened earth, and burdened both their lives. He thanked God that he could stand there in the solemn aisles of the Forest and feel the wind fan his hair, and hear the sighing of the woodland boughs, and look upwards to the holy stillness of the skies without the myriad voices of the Earth and Heaven calling on him to answer for his guilt—that he could stand there under the fair evening stars, stainless from the guilt which had tempted him in the darkest hour of his life, able to look up with a clear brow, and a fearless conscience, into the pure eyes of night!

CHAPTER XVII.

Tried in the Fire, and Proven.

It is strange how the outer world surrounds yet never touches the inner; how the gay and lighter threads of life intervene yet never mingle with those that are darkest and sternest, as the parasite clings to the forest tree, united yet ever dissimilar! From the twilight gloom of the silent forest, from solitude and temptation and suffering, De Vigne passed suddenly into the glitter and glow and brilliance, the light laughter and ringing jests, and the peopled salons of the *Diaman du Forêt*. From the dense woods and the stirless silence of the night, only haunted by the presence of the woman who had cursed his life, and well-nigh lured him to irrevocable and ineffaceable guilt, he came by abrupt transition into a gay and brilliant society, from which all sombre shadows were banished, and where its groups, laughing, jesting, flirting, carrying on the light intrigues of the hour,

seemed for the time as though no sorrow or suffering, bitterness or passion, had ever intruded amongst them. Strange contrast! those glittering salons, and that dark and deadly solitude of the beech woods of the Gros Fouteau—not stranger than the contrast between the face which had lured him to crime and misery, in the dense shadow of the forest gloom, and the one on which he looked as, when away from the gaiety and the gossip, the light laughter and the subdued murmur of society, he drew her, after awhile, unnoticed, out on to the terrace which overlooked the wooded and stately gardens of the Diaman du Forêt, where the moonbeams slept on lawn and lake, avenue and statue, in the calm May night, that shrouded Fontainebleau, town and palace and forest, in its silvery mist.

Neither of them spoke; neither could have found voice to utter all that arose in their hearts at the touch of each other's hand, the gaze of each other's eyes, the sense of each other's presence.

Dark and heavy upon them was the weight of that past hour. Silent they stood together in the solitude of the night that was calm, hushed, and peaceful, fit for a love either more tranquil, or more fully blessed, than theirs.

His voice was hoarse and broken as he spoke at last, bowing his head over her:

"I have sinned before Heaven and before thee. I have fallen very low!"

She did not answer him, she only lifted her eyes to his. By the silvery gleam of the night he could see the unswerving fidelity, after all, through all, promised him for all eternity while her heart should beat, and her eyes have life to gaze upon his face.

Now he knew, never again to doubt it, how unwear-

ingly, and how entirely, this imperishable and unselfish love which he had won, would cling around him to his dying day. The night was still, not a murmur stirred among the trees, not a breath moved upon the surface of the little lake, not a cloud swept across the pale pure stars, gleaming beyond in the blue heavens. The earth was hushed in deep repose, nature slept the solemn and tranquil sleep which no fret and wrath of man has power to weaken or arrest; while he, the mortal, with human love trembling on his lips, and human suffering quivering in his heart, told in broken earnest words the confession of that dire temptation which so nearly had ripened into crime. He laid his heart bare to her, with all its sins and weaknesses, its errors and its impulses, knowing that his trust was sacred, secure of sympathy, and tenderness, and pity. He spoke to her as men can never speak to men, as they can seldom speak to women. He told her of that darker nature born in him, as more or less in all, which had slumbered unknown, till opportunity awoke it; and which then, aroused in all its force, had wrestled with all that was merciful, gentle, and better within him. He told her of that fell Tempter of Thought which had arisen so suddenly in night and solitude, and whispered him to a deed that would give him back his freedom, avenge his wrongs, and shatter the fetters that weighed him down with their unmerited burden. He told how he had fled from it, how he had conquered it, how he had escaped with pure hands and stainless soul, to render thanks to God for his deliverance, in the solemn forest-aisles of that temple, where man best meets the mystery of Deity; which human hands never fashioned, and human creeds, and follies, and priestcraft cannot enter to lower and pollute.

He told her, laying bare to her all the deadly crime

begotten in his heart, and so well-nigh wrought by his hand into the black guilt with which one human life stifles and tramples out another: then, he asked her:

"Can you love me—after this?"

She lifted up her face, that was white as death where the light of the moon shone upon it; and her voice was low and tremulous, yet sustained with the great heroic tenderness which did not shrink from him in his sin, which did not recoil from him in his fell temptation, but which forgot and washed out its own wrong in the deep waters of an exhaustless love:

"I shall love you while I have life! I have said it; I can say no more. Let the world condemn you—you are the dearer to *me*!"

He crushed her closer in his arms.

"Great Heaven! Such love as yours binds us with stronger force, and consecrates holier tie, than any priest-craft can ever forge. *She* is *not* my wife. Reason, right, sense, justice, all divorced her from the very hour I left her at the altar, my bitter enemy, my relentless foe, who won me by deceit, who would have made my life a hell, who renders me a devil, not a man! *She* my wife! Great God, I renounce her!"

Alma, as the fierce words were muttered in his throat, clung to him, her voice low and dreamy, like the voice of one in feverish pain.

"She is no wife of yours; a woman that could hate you and betray you! A woman whom you left at the altar! How can they bind you to her?"

"They may!—*I* care not, save that she holds the name that should be yours. This was all that was wanting to fill up the measure of my hate for her. Let fools go babble of her claims upon me if they will! From the hour we parted at the altar I never saw her face until

this night; from this night I divorce her before God. She is no wife of mine; her rights are mere legal quibbles, love never forged, fidelity never sanctified, God never blessed them! I claim my heritage of justice as a man—my right to live, to love, to taste the common happiness of my fellows. The very birds around us find their mates! Why are we, alone of all the earth, to be wrenched apart, and condemned to live and die asunder? Why are we, alone, to be forced to surrender all that makes life of joy and value? Alma!—surely we love well enough to defy the world together?”

He paused abruptly, his frame shook with the great passions in him, which were stronger than his strength; the words broke from him unawares—the words that would decide their fate! her face was flushed to a deep scarlet glow as he looked down on it by the silvery light of the moon, her hands closed tighter upon his, her lips quivered, and he felt her slight, delicate form tremble in his arms. She clung closer to him still, her breathing hurried and low, like broken, rapid sighs; her eyes, humid and dark as night, fell beneath his; that one word, “together,” stirred the depths of her heart, as the storm-winds the depths of the sea. Two years before, she would have scarce comprehended the extent of the sacrifice asked of her, more than Mignon or Haidee; scarce known more fully than they, all it called on her to surrender. Now she knew its meaning; knew that this man, who was thus pitilessly cursed for no crime, nor error, but simply for a *mistake*—the fatal and irrevocable mistake of early marriage—would be condemned by the world if he took his just heritage of freedom. She knew that, for a divine compassion, an imperishable love, she, who clung to him, would be laid by social law beneath a social ban, would be forbid by it from every sphere

and every honour that were her due by birth, by intellect, by right. She knew her sacrifice. She knew that she should decide the destiny of her whole future; and the proud nature, though strong enough to defy both, was one to abhor any free glance, to resent every scornful word: the haughty and delicate spirit was one to feel keenly, yielding one inch of her just place. But—she loved, and the world was far from her; she loved, and her life lay in his. Fidelity is the marriage-bond of God: the laws of man cannot command it, the laws of man are void without it. Would she not render it unto him, even to her grave? Would she not be his wife in the sight of Heaven? Suffering for him would be proudly borne, sacrifice to him would be gladly given. She would have followed him to the darkness of the tomb; she would have passed with him through the furnace of the fires; content, always content, so that her hands were closed on his, so that she had strength to look up to his face.

This is sin, say you? Verily, if it be so, it is the sublimest sin that ever outshone virtue!

He bent his head lower and lower, and his words were hoarse and few.

“Can you love me—enough for this?”

He felt a shudder as of icy cold run through her frame as she lay folded in his embrace. By the white light of the moon, he saw the scarlet blush upon her face waver, and burn, and deepen; quick, tremulous sighs heaved her heart; her arms wreathed and twined closer and closer about him; her eyes gleamed with an eternal love, as they met his own in the pale, soft radiance of the stars:

“You are my world, my all! Your will is mine!”

The words were spoken that would give her to him.

The whisper died away, scarce stirring the air; the

fevered flush upon her face glowed warm, then changed to a marble whiteness. She clung to him closer still; and passionate tears, born from the strong emotions of the hour, welled slowly up, and fell from those eyes which she had first lifted to his when she was a little child, flinging flowers at him in the old library at Weivehurst. She loved him, she pitied him; she would forsake all to give him back that happiness of which another's fraud had robbed him. She thought of nothing than save him; and if he had stretched out his hand and bade her follow him into the dark, cold shadows of the grave, she would have gone with him fondly, fearlessly, unselfishly, still thinking only of him; what comfort she could give, what trial share, what pain avert. She loved him. She was tried in the fire, and proven. The world, I say, was very far from Alma then—as far as the fret, and noise, and bustle of the city streets are from the fair and solemn stars of heaven.

And in the stillness of the night their lips met. She would give up the world for him.

* * * * *

He parted from the woman he loved, upon the terrace that night, under the starry summer skies; he could not return to the crowded salon within; he could not join again the glitter and gaiety of French society; and he took his way across the park towards the little village of Chailly, to rest there for the few short hours which remained before sunrise.

It was now midnight; all was still as the silence of the grave about him, while he went across the great stretches of sward under the trees, with only the hoot of a night bird in his ear, or the stealing of a fox among the brush woods breaking the deep tranquility. The awe of that great guilt, which so near had been his, was still

upon him; the weight of his erring past hung on him; his heart was sad and heavy, and the fruit of his own bygone madness was bitter in his teeth. His pride was bent; his iron will broken; his deep passions chastened; a chasm of crime had yawned at his feet, to leave him a humbler and a gentler man. And the bitterness of a yearning and futile remorse, a remorse which made him loathe himself, a remorse which gnawed and seared his heart like scorching fire, was on him, as he remembered across the far stretch of misspent years, his mother's prophecy:

"You will love again; to find the crowning sorrow of your life, or drag another in to share your curse!"

Like the blow of a knife into open, bleeding wounds, struck a few coarse laughing words whispered in his ear, as he paced through the dense woodland in the shadows and the stillness of the midnight hour:

"Do you love your wife any dearer to-night, sir; or are you thinking what a cursed mistake you made a dozen years ago?"

He swung round, starting like a thoro'bred under the galling and the rending of the spur; in the moon-light solitude the words sounded like the hissing gibe of demons, mocking in his ear, and jabbering at his bondage. Close behind him, in the dim light, he saw his ex-valet, Raymond, with a laugh upon his face, as the moon shone full on it.

Stung past endurance by the impudent leer of this cur who dogged his steps even in solitude; maddened at the words which made a brutal jest of the deadly curse upon his life, De Vigne, by sheer instinct, and without thought or pause, seized him by his throat, and flung him away from him, as men fling a dog out of their path.

"Hound! learn how I bear with insolence!"

The man fell with a heavy crash among the brush-wood; but the ferns and gorse of the thick undergrowth tempered his fall, and with a muttered oath he gathered himself slowly up, and sprang with a light bound after De Vigne:

"Sir! sir, listen! Don't be so hasty, Major. I mean you no insult, before God I don't. I can do for you what nobody else can!"

De Vigne motioned him aside:

"Out of my way, or I shall do you a mischief!"

But the man was undaunted, and ran beside him, to keep pace with his swift strides, panting, breathless, eager:

"Do hear me, sir, do. By Heaven, sir, I can free you from your wife!"

At the words, spoken in such an hour, De Vigne staggered as if a shot had struck him, and reeled backward against the tall moss-grown fence which ran along the borders of the park. In the gray moonlight the man Raymond saw the dark blood that stained his face, then faded, leaving it an ashy pallor, and the gesture with which his hand went to his heart, like one under the heavy suffocation of asphyxia:

"*Free! Free! O God!*"

His voice rattled incoherently in his throat, he paused for breath, he looked up to the starlit skies with a wild appealing stare, the earth reeled round him, his eyes swam, he wondered whether this were delirium or dream.

The man was awed and frightened at his look; and came up to him and shook him by the arm:

"Sir, sir, for Heaven's sake don't look like that! It's *truth* I'm telling you. She's not your wife, sir!"

De Vigne's eyes turned on him with a mute, imploring, unconscious prayer; his lips quivered, his veins swelled, his voice shook, hoarse, stifled, inarticulate: the agony of joy unnerves us more than the agony of death!"

"Not my wife! *Not!* Good God! you are not brute enough to lie—to hoax——"

The words died in his throat, and the man looked up at him steadily and fearlessly in the light slanting in through the boughs.

"Fore George, sir, no. I wouldn't be such a black-guard!" he said, heartily. "It ain't no lie! I can do for you what no divorce laws can, thanks to the timorous fools that frame them. If those gentlemen were all fettered themselves, they'd make the gate go a little easier to open! I *can* set you free, but how I won't tell you till we come a little to terms."

Free! Not to Bonnevard, pining in the darkness and wretchedness of Chillon, was freedom what it was to him. Free! The very thought maddened him with eager, impatient, breathless thirst for *certainly*. He seized the man by the shoulders in his iron grip:

"Great Heaven! Tell me all—all; do you hear? —all!"

"Gently, gently, Major," said Raymond, wincing under his grasp, "or I shall have no breath to tell you anything. I can set you free, sir; and I don't wonder you wish to be rid of her! But before I tell you how, you must tell me if you will give me the proper price for information."

De Vigne shook him like a little dog.

"Cur! Do you think I will make a compact with such as *you*? Out with all you know, and I will reward you afterwards: out with it, or it will be the worse for you!"

- "But Major," persisted the man, halting for breath, "if I tell you all first, what gage have I that you will not act on my information, and never give me a far-thing?"

"My word!" gasped De Vigne, hurling the answer down his throat. "It is bond enough! Speak; do you hear. Is she not my wife?"

"No, sir; because!—she was mine first!"

"*Yours?* Then——"

"Your marriage is null and void, sir."

As the words of his release were uttered in the hushed stillness of the midnight woodlands, De Vigne staggered against the fence, dizzy and blind as in delirium. Free! Free!—his name once more his own, purified from the taint of her claim upon it; free!—his home once more his own, purged from the dark and haunting memories of an irremediable past; free!—from the bitterness of his own folly, so long repented of in agony and solitude; free!—to recompense with honour in the sight of men, the love which would have given up all for his sake, and followed him, content, to any fate.

Breathless with his new-born hope, he leaned there in the solitude of the night, forgetful of Raymond's presence, seeing, hearing, heeding nothing, save that one word—*free!* the blood flowing with fever-heat through all his veins, every nerve throbbing with the electric shock, his whole frame trembling with voiceless thanksgiving.

He covered his eyes with his hand, like a man dazzled with the sudden radiance of a noontide sun.

"Will you swear that?"

"Aye, sir, on the Bible, and before all the courts and judges in the land, if you like."

De Vigne gave one quick, deep sigh, flinging off from him for ever the iron burden of many years:

"Tell me all, quick, from beginning to end, and give me all your proofs."

He spoke with the eager, wayward, restless impatience of his boyhood; the old light gleamed in his eyes, the old music rang in his voice. The chains were struck off; he was free!

"Very well, sir. I must make a long story of it. Nineteen years ago, sir, Lucy Davis was a very dashing-looking girl—as you thought, Major, at that time—and I was twenty-two, and much more easily taken in than I was when I had seen a little more of human nature. My name was Trefusis, sir, not Raymond at all. I took an *alias* when I entered your service. My father was a Newmarket leg, and he made a good lot of money one way and another; and he had more gentlemen in his power, and more of your peerage swells, sir, under his dirty old thumb, knowing all that he knew, and having done for 'em all that he had done, than you'd believe if I was to swear it to you. He wanted to make a gentleman of me. 'Charlie, my boy,' he used to say, 'with brains and tin you may be as good as them swells any day; they hain't no sort of business to look down on you. I've done dirty work enough to serve them, I reckon.' He wanted to make a gentleman of me, and he gave me a capital education, and more money and fine clothes than any boy in the school. He went to glory when I was about eighteen, sir, leaving me all his tin to do just whatever I liked with, and not a soul to say me nay. I soon spent it, sir; every stiver was gone in no time. I bought horses, and jewellery, and wine. I betted, I played; in short, I made ducks and drakes of it in a very few years with a lot of idle young dogs

like myself. Jimmy Jarvis—you will have heard of him, sir?—was going to have a mill with the Brownlow Boy, at Greystone Green, and I went down with two or three others to see the fight. While I was in Frestonhills, sir, I saw Lucy Davis in the milliner's shop in High-street, and I fell straight in love with her for her great black eyes and her bright carnation colour. I went to church to see her the next day, and bowed to her; and so we got acquainted, sir, and I fell more and more in love, and I wouldn't have stirred from Frestonhills just then to have made my fortune. That was a year after you had left, sir. But I knew nothing of *your* affair, sir, then—trust her!

“Well! I was in love with Lucy, and she thought me a man of fashion and of fortune, and married me; the register is in the church of Frestonhills; you can see it, sir, any day you like. In six months I thought myself a great fool for having fettered myself. Lucy's temper was horrid;—always had been—and when she found out that all my riches would soon make themselves wings and flee away, it was not softened much. She helped me to spend my money, sir, for twelve months, leading me about as wretched a life as any woman could lead a man. We lived chiefly abroad, sir, at the German Baths; then the tin was all gone, and Lucy grew a very virago; as she had taken me only out of ambition, it was a hard cut to her, I dare say, to find me a mere nobody. We parted by mutual consent; I left her at Wiesbaden, and went my own ways; she had spent every shilling I had. Some time after I was fool enough to forge a cheque; it was found out, and they shipped me off to the colonies, and Lucy was free of me. Some years after, I learnt what she did with herself; at Wiesbaden old Lady Fantyre was staying, rough-

ing, gambling, and living by her wits, as you know she always has done, sir, ever since anybody can remember her. She saw Lucy at the Kursaal, and Lucy had improved wonderfully in twelve months; she could get up a smattering of things very fast; she could dress well on little or nothing; she had quick wits, and a haughty, defiant, knock-me-down manner that concealed all her ignorance; and carried everything before her. Old Fantyre took a fancy to her; she wanted to have a companion, somebody to make her up well for the evenings, and read her novels to her, and humour her caprices, and amuse the young fellows while she fleeced them at *écarté* or *vingt-et-un*. Lucy seemed just fit for her place. She didn't know she was married; Lucy made herself out an unprotected girl, whom you, sir, had deserted, and old Fantyre took her into her service. Now, Lucy was uncommonly clever, hard-hearted, and sharp-sighted; she humoured the old woman, she made herself necessary to her, she chimed in with all her sayings, she listened to all her stories, she got into her good graces, and made her do pretty well what she chose. You remember, sir, perhaps, that when you and Lucy parted at Frestonhills she told you she'd be revenged on you. She isn't a woman to *forget*. She told Lady Fantyre about you, and she induced her to think that if she could catch you and marry you, what a capital thing it would be for both of them, and how royally they could help you to spend your fortune.

"I must tell you, Lucy had heard that the government ship that had taken me out to Botany Bay had foundered, and she didn't know that I and a few others had managed to drift in the jolly-boat till an American cruiser picked us up. She thought I was drowned, or else she would have been too wide awake to go in for

bigamy. Clever women don't do that foolery out of novels! Old Fentyre listened, agreed, and took her to England, and introduced her as her niece. There, as you know, sir, you met her, and fell into her toils again. I don't wonder you did not know her. Years and society and dress, and the education she'd given herself, made such a difference. Four years after you had married her, I came to Europe, and went as valet to the Duc de Vermuth. I often wondered what had become of my wife; till one Sunday, when I went to the Pré Catalan, I saw a lady in a carriage, talking and laughing with a number of young fellows round her. She was a remarkably fine-looking woman, and something in her face struck me as like my wife. At that minute she saw me. She turned as white as her rouge would let her, gave a sort of scream, and stared at me. Perhaps she thought she saw my ghost. At any rate, she pulled the check-string, and drove away from me as fast as she could. Of course I didn't let her give me the slip like that. I followed her to a dashing hotel in the Champs Elysées, and just stepped up to her, and said, 'Well, old girl, how are you?' Horrible she looked—as if she longed to kill me—and, indeed, I dare say she did. She signed me not to blow on her, and said, 'Not now; come at eight this evening.' I went; and she told me all her story, and offered me, if I would keep quiet and tell nobody she was my wife, to go shares with me in the money you allowed her provided she lived out of England. I thought about it a little; I saw I should get nothing by proclaiming our marriage; I closed with her, and lived at my ease. But she grew screwy; she didn't pay up to time. She used to anticipate the money, and then defraud me of my share. At last it came into my head, when I heard you had come back from India, to

see what sort of a gentleman you were, and whether you wanted your freedom bad enough to pay me a high price for it. You required a valet. I entered your service; and when I was sent down to Richmond with the parrot and the books and the flowers, and so on, for that little lady—no, Major, don't stop me, I mean no offence to her—I thought the time would soon come, when you'd give *any* price for your freedom, for I heard plenty of talk, sir, at that time, about you and her; servants trouble themselves more about their master's business than they do about their own. The day you dismissed me from your service, I was going to tell you, if you had only listened. But you were so impatient and so haughty, that I thought I'd let you go on in ignorance, and free yourself, if ever you wanted, as best you might. I entered Lord Vane Castleton's service then. You know he was gone quite mad about Miss Tressillian. It seems, sir, he had been very good friends with Lucy in Paris, and he wrote and told her you were in love again, and with somebody who, he thought, didn't know you were married, and that if she wished to put a stop to it, she should come over and tell the young lady. Over she did come, saw him first, and then went to St. Crucis; and after she'd been—I didn't know she was in London—he sent me to bring Miss Tressillian to Windsor, while you were sitting in court-martial on Mr. Halkett. Mine was a dirty job, sir, I know, and a rascally one. Don't look at me so fiercely, Major, for God's sake! I am sorry I did it now, for she'd sweet blue eyes, that lady, and I was never quite easy till I knew she got out of Lord Vane's clutches. Then you went to the Crimea, and Lucy paid worse and worse. At last I thought I would try you again, if only to spite Lucy, who was living in splendour, and grudging me

every shilling. I wrote to you at the Crimea—I tried to speak to you in the Rue Lafitte—finally, I tracked you here. Now I’ve told you all, Major. I know you well enough to know your word is as sure a bond as another man’s cheque; and if you’ll go with me, sir, to Trinity Church, Frestonhills, I’ll show you the register of my marriage, which makes yours null and void.”

And thus in the hush around, only broken by the sigh of the wind, or the sweep of a night-bird, he heard the history which set him free. His arm was wound about the stem of a tree nigh, for he was dizzy, like a man after a mortal blow; he shaded his eyes with his hand; his lips moved silently in voiceless prayer to God, and whispers to the woman whom he loved; his breathing came short and thick; his whole frame trembled like a woman’s. The ecstasy of that hour! No criminal, condemned to death and suddenly reprieved, felt the warm rush of fresh air welcoming him as he issued—a free man—from the darkness of his prison-cell of doom, with more bewildering joy than he now felt; his liberty from the festering and bitter chains which so long had dragged upon him—his liberty from the weary weight, the repented folly, the bitter curse of Early Marriage.

He was silent, breathing fast and loud, struggling to realise his freedom from his bondage. Then—he threw back his head with a proud, joyous gesture; he looked up to the brilliant summer stars shining above his head; he drew in with a deep long breath the free sweet air that streamed around him. He turned his eyes upon the man, flashing with their old, shadowless light:

“Right! I would pay *any* price for freedom. Let us go to-night to England. I will not lose an hour—a moment!”

CHAPTER XVIII.

Freed from Bondage.

FRESTONHILLS, unchanged, lay nestling among the green pastures and fresh woods of Berkshire, and all the old familiar places struck strangely on him as he passed them on the morrow. There flowed the silver Kennet, bright and rapid as of old, rushing on its swift sunny way past the wild luxuriant hedges; and through the quiet country towns and villages. There, on its banks, were schoolboys lying among the purple clover and under the fragrant hawthorns, as poor little Curly had done long years ago. There were the dark palings, and the forest-trees of Weivehurst, long changed to other hands before its rightful owner was laid to rest, his grave marked only by a simple wooden cross, under the southern skies of Lorave. There, against the blue heavens, rose above its woods the grey pinnacles of the old house where Alma Tressillian had made the roof ring with her childish laughter, playing under the golden laburnums that flung the same shadows on the lawn, now, as then. There was the old Chancery, its gable roofs and its low ivy-grown walls; as he passed a lady glanced up, gardening among her geraniums and heliotropes—it was Miss Arabella—the ringlets very grey now! A little farther on, in the old playing-field, there were the wickets, and the bats, and the jumping poles, and four or five boys, in their shirt sleeves and their straw hats, enjoying their half-holiday, as we had done before them. So life goes on; when one is bowled out, another is ready to step into his shoes, and, no matter how many the ball of death may knock over, the cricket of life is kept up the same, and players are never wanting!

The register lay on the table, under the arched Norman window of the vestry of the church where, twenty years before, we had fidgeted through the dreary periods of the rector's cruel sermon full an hour long, and cast glances over our hymn-books at the pastrycook's pretty daughters.

The great old register, ponderous and dusty, lay on the table, the sunbeams from the stained glass above falling on its leather binding and its thickly-written leaves, full of so many records of man's joy and sorrow, crowded with so many names which now were empty sounds; penned by so many hands which were now crumbled to dust under the churchyard sods near by. The great register lay on its table in the dark, quiet, solitary vestry—the last he had seen was the one in which he had signed his doom, twelve years before, in the church at Vigne. The old sexton unlocked the book, and with shaking, infirm hand turned over the leaves one after the other. De Vigne leant against the table, watching for the entry, his breath short and laboured, his pulse beating, a mist before his eyes, a great agony of dread—the dread of *deception* tightening his heart, and oppressing him to suffocation. If the man's story were not true!—if this, too, were a hoax and a fraud! Breathless, trembling in every limb with fear and hope, he bent over the book, pushing the old man's hand away; his agony of impatience could not brook the slow and awkward fumbling of leaf after leaf, by the palsied feebleness of age. He thrust the pages back, one after another, till he reached the year 18—. Entry after entry met his eye; from lords of the manor, their ancestral names dashed across the page; from poor peasants, who could only make their mark; from feminine signatures, trembling and illegible; marriage after marriage met his eager glance, but not yet the one

which was to loosen his fetters and set him free. He turned the leaves over, one after the other, his heart throbbing quick with wild hope and irrepressible fear. At last the setting sun, shining in through the rich hues, the rubies and the ambers, the heads of saints, and blazoned shields on the stained window above his head, flung radiant colours on one dim yellow sheet, illumining with its aureole of light the two signatures he sought—the words that gave him ransom—the names that struck off his chains:

CHARLES TREFUSIS.
LUCY DAVIS.

And as his eye fell upon the page which freed him from the wife who had so long cursed his life, and stained his honour, and made his name abhorrent in his sight because she bore it, De Vigne staggered forward, and, flinging the casement open, leant out into the calm, fresh evening, stunned by his sudden deliverance as by some mortal blow, and gasping for breath, while the warm westerly wind swept over him, like a man who has escaped from the lurid heat of fire into the pure, sweet air of a breaking dawn.

He was FREE! The life which he had so madly sought to spend like water, and fling off from him as an evil too bitter to be borne, among the jungles of Scinde and on the steppes of the Crimea, was once more rich, and precious, and beloved;—he learned at last what his wayward nature had been long ere it would believe, that the fate we deem a curse is oftentimes an angel in disguise, if we wait patiently for the unfolding of its wings from the darkness which enshrouds them.

CHAPTER XIX.

Nemesis.

Two days after there was a fête given at Enghein, at the princely maison de plaisance of an English Earl—a stout, bloated old man, lavish as the wind, and rich as a Russian, who, consequently, had all the most seductive Parisiennes to make love to him; Delilah caring very little who her Samson be, provided she can cut off his locks to her own advantage. The fête was of unusual magnificence, and the Empress of it was “the Trefusis,” as we call her, “that poor fellow De Vigne’s wife—a very fast lot, too,” as men in general called her—“ma Reine,” as the Earl of Morehampton called her, in that pleasant familiarity which she ever readily admitted to those good friends of hers, who emptied half the Palais Royal upon her in bijouterie, jewellery, and other innocent gifts of amity;—a familiarity that always stopped *just* short of the divorce court, over the water. The Trefusis reigned at Enghein, and remarkably well she looked in her sovereignty, her jewelled ivory parasol handle for her sceptre, and her handsome eyes for her *droit de conquête*. Only three nights before she had lain on the dank grass in the Royal Forest, where the mad agony of a man, whom she had goaded and taunted, had flung her off, bidding her thank God, not him, he had not murdered her in that ghastly temptation. Only three nights before! but to-day she sat under the limes at Enghein, the very memory of that hour cast behind her for evermore, save when she remembered how she had jeered, how she had triumphed—remembered in gloating glee, for her victim could not escape her snare. The Trefusis had rarely looked better—never felt more

secure in her completed vengeance upon De Vigne, her omnipotent sway over Morehampton, and all her lordly clique, than now. She was beautifully rouged, the carnation tint rich and soft, and defying all detection; her black Chantilly lace sweeping around her superb form; a parure of amethysts glittering in her bosom as she drove down to the villa in the Earl's carriage, and reigned under the limes in 'dominance and triumph, as she had reigned since the day she had first looked at her own face in the mirror, and sworn by that face, to rise, and to revenge.

In brilliant style Morehampton had prepared to receive her, for he admired the quasi-milliner of Freston-hills more than anything else, for the time being, to the extreme rage of La Baronne de Bréloques, Mademoiselle Céleste Papillon, of the Français, and many other fair Parisiennes. There was the villa itself, luxurious as Eugène Sue's; and there were grounds with alcoves, and statues, and rosiers; there was a "pavillon des arts," where some of the best cantatrici in Paris sang like nightingales; there was a *déjeûner*, with the best cookery in France—who can say more?—there were wines that would have made Rahab or Father Mathew swear, with Trimalchio, "*Vita vinum est*;" there were plenty of men, lions, *littérateurs*, and milords Anglais, who were not bored here, because they could say and do just what they pleased, with no restraint upon them whatever. And there were plenty of women (very handsome ones, too, for the Earl would never have wasted his invitations on plain faces), who smoked and laughed at *grivoises* tales, and drank the Johannisberg and the Steinberg very freely for such dainty lips, and imitated us with their *tranchant* manners, their slang, and their lionneism, in everything except their toilettes, which were exclusively feminine in their brilliance and voluminous extent.

The déjeuner was over, during which the noble Earl, as his friends in the Upper House termed him, when they were most politely damning him, was exceedingly devoted to the Trefusis, and thought he had never seen anything finer than those admirably-tinted eyes and beautifully-coloured cheeks. He did not care for your nymphs of eighteen, they were generally too shy and too thin for his taste; he liked *bien conservées*, full-blown, magnificent roses, like the ex-milliner. The déjeuner was over, at which the Trefusis had reigned with supreme contentment, laughed very loudly, and drank champagne enough for a young cornet just joined; at which old Fantyre had enjoyed the pâtés de foie gras and other delicacies, like an old *gourmette* as she was, told dirty stories in broad Irish-French, and chuckled in herself to see gouty old Morehampton playing the gallant; and at which Mademoiselle Papillon could have fainted with spite, but not willing to give the detested Englishwoman so enormous a triumph, resisted her feelings with noble heroism.

The déjeuner was over, and the guests had broken up into groups, dispersing themselves over the villa and its grounds. The Trefusis and Morehampton took themselves to the Pavillon des Arts; but, after hearing one song from the "Traviata," Ma Reine was bored—she cared nothing for music—and she threw herself down on a seat under some linden-trees to take ice, listen to his private band, which was playing close by, and flatter him about his new barouche, which she knew would be offered her as soon as she had praised it. It was by such gifts as these she managed to eké out her income, and live *au premier* in the Champs Elysées. Morehampton flung himself on the grass at her feet, forgetful of gout and lumbago; other men gathered round her; she

was "a deuced fine woman," they thought, but, "by George! they didn't envy De Vigne." The band played valses and Béranger airs; the Earl was diverted between admiration of the black eyes above, and rueful recollections of the damp turf beneath, him; Mademoiselle Papillon made desperate love to Leslie Egerton, of the Queen's Bays, but never missed a word or a glance that went on under the lime-trees for all that, with that peculiar double set of optics and oral nerves with which women seem gifted. Very brilliant, and pleasant, and lively, and Watteau-like it all was; and, standing under an alcove at some little distance, mingling unnoticed with the crowd of domestics, stood Raymond, *alias* Charles Trefusis, come to claim his wife, as he had been bound to do on receipt of De Vigne's reward—none the less weighty a one, you may be sure, because the man had been given only a promise, and not a bond. De Vigne's honour in those matters was in exact inverse ratio to the world's.

"By Jove! sir," the fellow whispered to me—I had come with him to see he kept good faith, and did not give us the slip—"just look at her, what a dash she cuts, and what a fool she's making of that old lord! That's Lord Morehampton, ain't it, sir? I think I remember him in Pall Mall. I suppose Lucy's bewitched him. Isn't she a wonderful woman, sir? Who'd think, to see her now, that she was ever the daughter of a beggar-woman, and a little milliner girl at Frestonhills, making bonnets and dresses for parsons' wives!"

I looked at her as he spoke, and, though it seemed wonderful to him, it did not seem wonderful to me. Lucy Davis's rise was such a rise as Lucy Davis was certain to make, favoured by opportunity as she had been—neither more or less of a rise than a hard-headed,

unscrupulous, excessively handsome woman, determined to push her way, and able to take the best possible advantage of every turn of the wheel, was pretty sure to effect. She could not make herself a gentlewoman—she could not make herself a woman of talent or of ton. She was merely what she had been for the last dozen years, with the aid of money, dress, and assurance—a dashing, handsome, skilful intrigante, whose magnificence of form made men forget her style, and whose full-blown beauty made them content with the paucity of ideas, and the vulgar harshness of tone, in the few words which ever passed her lips, which were too wise to essay often, that sure touchstone of mind and education—conversation.

Raymond stood looking at her, a cunning, malicious gleam of satisfaction in his little light eyes. His wife had made a better thing of life than he: he detested her accordingly; he had many old grudges to pay off against her for bitter, snarling words, and money flung to him, because she feared him, with a sneer and an invective; he hated her for having lived in clover, while he had not even had a taste of luxury, save the luxuries of flunkeyism and valetdom, since they parted, and he enjoyed pulling her up in the midst of her glories with such malignant pleasure as was natural to his disposition. She had married him at two-and-twenty; she had made him repent of it before the honeymoon was out; she had played her cards since to her own glorification and his mortification; there was plenty in all that to give him no little enjoyment in throwing her back, with a jerk, in the midst of her race. He stood looking at her with a peculiar smile on his lips. I dare say he was thinking what a fool he had been to fall in love with the black-eyed milliner of Frestonhills, and what a far greater fool

still was his lordship of Morehampton to waste so much time and so much money, such wines, such jewellery, and such adoration, on this full-blown rose, whom no one ever tried to gather, but they impaled themselves upon her dexterously moss-hidden thorns.

At last the Trefusis, tired of ices, cancons, and Morehampton's florid compliments, rose to go into the house, and look at some Rose Du Berri vases that had belonged to Madame de Parabère; Morehampton sprung to his feet with boyish lightness and gallant disregard of the gout, and then—her husband stepped forward; and I doubt if Nemesis, though she often took a more imposing, ever assumed a deadlier guise than that of the *ci-devant* valet!

The Trefusis gave an irrepressible start as she saw him; the colour left her lips; her cheeks it could not leave. She began laughing and talking to Morehampton hurriedly, nervously, incoherently, but there was a wild, lurid gleam in her eyes, restless and savage. Her husband touched his hat submissively, but with a queer smile still on his face:

"I beg your pardon, my lord, but may I be allowed to relieve you of the escort of my wife?"

Morehampton twisted himself round, stuck his gold glass in his eye, and stared with all his might: the men crowded closer, stroking their moustaches in curiosity and surprise; the English women, who could understand the speech, suspended the spoonfuls of ice that were en route to their lips, and broke off their conversation for a minute; the Trefusis flushed scarlet to her very brow, her eyes scintillated and glared like a tigress just stung by a shot that inflames all her savage nature into fury—ever ready with a lie, she clung to Morehampton's arm;

"My dear lord! I know this poor creature very well; he is a lunatic—a confirmed lunatic—a harmless one quite; it is one of his hallucinations that every woman he sees and admires is his wife, who ran away from him, and turned his brain with her infidelity. He is harmless—at least I have always heard so—but pray tell your servants to take him away. It is very horrible."

It was an admirably-told falsehood!—told, too, with the most natural ease, the most natural compassion imaginable—and it passed muster with Morehampton, who signed to two of his lacqueys.

"Seize that fellow and turn him out of the grounds. How did he get in, Soames? Go for some gendarmes if he resist you," said the Earl, aloud: then bent his head, and added (*sotto voce*), "How grieved I am, dearest, that you should be so absurdly annoyed. What a shockingly stupid fellow! Brain turned, you say—and for a *wife*?"

But Raymond signed off the two footmen, who were circling gingerly round him like two dogs round a hedgehog, not admiring their task, having a genuine horror of lunacy, and being enervated, probably, by the epicureanisms of plush-existence.

"That is a pretty story, my lord, only, unfortunately, it isn't *true*. Ben trovato—but all a humbug! I am as sane as anybody here; much too sane to have my brain turned because my wife ran away from me. Most men would thank their stars for such a kind deliverance! I am come to claim mine, though, for a little business there is to be done, and she is on your arm, my lord. She married me nineteen years ago, and made me repent of it before a month was out."

"Dear, dear! how absurd, and yet how shocking! Pray send him away," whispered the Trefusis, clinging

to the Earl's arm, looking, it must be confessed, more like a demon than a divinity, for her lips were white and twitching savagely, and spots of rouge glared scarlet.

"Do you hear me, fellows? Turn that impudent rascal out!" swore Morehampton.

"That fellow's wife! Why, she's De Vigne's wife. Everybody knows that!" muttered Leslie Egerton, sticking his glass in his eye. "Saw him married myself, poor wretch!"

"*Mais qu'est-ce que c'est donc?*" asked Mademoiselle Papillon, edging herself in with a dim delicious idea that it was something detrimental to her rival.

"Kick him out!" "Turn him out!" "An escaped lunatic!" "Impertinent rascal!" "*Ma foi! qu'a-t-il donc!*" "*Mais comme c'est extraordinaire!*" "*Dieu! qu'est-ce que cela veut dire!*" resounded on all sides from Morehampton's guests and the Trefusis's adorers.

"Major de Vigne's wife?" repeated Raymond. "No, she's not, gentlemen: he knows it now, too, and thanks Heaven for it. She married me, as I say, nineteen years ago; more fool I to let her! *Twelve* years ago she married Major de Vigne. So you see, my lord, she is my wife, not his, and I believe what she has done is given a nasty, coarse, impolite term by law. What I tell you is quite true. Here's Captain Chevasney, my lord, who will tell you the same, and tell it better than I. Come, old girl, you've had a long holiday; you must come with me and work for a little while now."

He spoke with a diabolical grin, and, thus appealed to, I went forward and gave Morehampton as succinctly as I could the outlines of the story. The Trefusis's face grew grey as ashes, save where the rouge remained in two bright crimson spots fixed and unchanged, her eyes glittered in tiger-like fury, and her parasol fell to the

ground, its ivory handle snapped in two as her hands clenched upon it, only with a violent effort restraining herself from flying at mine or her husband's throat. For the first time in her life, the clever Greek had her own marked card turned against her; her schemes of malice, of vengeance, of ambition, were all swept away like cobwebs, never to be gathered up again. De Vigne was free, and she was caught in her own toils!

She swung round, sweeping her black Chantilly lace round her, and scattering her sandal-wood perfume on the air, laughing:

"And do you believe this cock-and-bull story, Lord Morehampton?" Her voice came out in a low, fierce hiss, like a serpent's, while her large, sensual, ruby lips curled and quivered with impotent rage. "Do you believe this valet's tale, bribed by a man who would move heaven and earth to prove his lawful marriage false, and the corroborating story told so glibly by a gentleman who, though he calls himself a man of honour, would swear black were white to pleasure his friend?"

"Come, come, there, my lady!" laughed Raymond. "Wait a bit. Don't call us bad names. You can't ride the high horse any more like that, and if you don't take care what you say we'll have you up for libel; we will, I assure you. Come, you used to be wide-awake once, and if you don't keep a civil tongue in your head it may be the worse for you."

"Lord Morehampton, will you endure this? I must appeal,"—began the Trefusis, turning again to that Noble Earl, who, with his double eye-glass in his eye, and his under-lip dropped in extreme astonishment, was too much amazed and too much annoyed, at such an unseemly and untimely interruption to his morning fête to take any part in the proceedings whatever. He was a

little shy of her, indeed, and kept edging back slowly and surely. She was trembling now from head to foot with rage at her defeat, terror for the consequences of the esclandre, mad wrath and hatred that her prey had slipped from her leash.

Her husband interrupted her with a coarse laugh, before she could finish her sentence.

"You appeal to your *cavalier servante*, madame? Oh! if my Lord Morehampton like to protect you, *I* have no objection; it will take a good deal of trouble off my hands, and I only wish him joy of his bargain. And next time, Lucy, make sure your chickens are hatched before you begin to count them!"

At so summary a proposition from a husband, the Earl involuntarily drew back, blank dismay visible on his purple and supine features. The offer alarmed him! The Trefusis was a deuced handsome woman, but she was a deuced expensive one too, thought he, and he hardly desired to be saddled with her thus. Added to his other expenses, for a permanence, she would go very near to ruin him, not to mention tears, reproaches, and scenes from many other quarters; and "she is a very vixen of a temper!" reflected his lordship, wisely, as he edged a little further back, and left her standing alone—who is not alone in defeat?

The Trefusis looked round on the crowds as they hung back from her, with a scathing, defiant glance, her fierce black eyes seeming to smite and wither all they lit on; great savage lines gathered round her mouth and down her brow, that was dark with mortification and impotent chained-up fury. She glanced around, her lips twitching like a snared animal's, her face ashy grey, save where the crimson rouge burned in two oval patches, flaring there like streaks of flame, in hideous contrast to

the deathly pallor of the rest. She was defeated, outdone, humiliated; the frauds and schemes of twenty years fruitless and unavailing in the end; her victim free, her enemies triumphant! She glared upon us all, till the boldest women shrank away terrified, and the men shuddered as they thought what a fiend incarnate this their "belle femme" was! Then she gathered her costly lace around her. To do her justice, she was game to the last!

"Order my carriage!"

She was beaten, but she would not show it; and to her carriage she swept, her rich Chantilly gathered round her, her silks rustling, her perfume scenting the air, her trained dress brushing the lime-blossoms off the lawn, her step stately and measured, her head defiantly erect, leaving on the grass behind her the fragile ivory handle, symbol of her foiled vengeance—her impotent wrath—her dethroned sovereignty. There was a moment's silence as she swept across the lawn, her tall Chasseur, in his dashing green and gold uniform, walking before her, her two footmen with their long white wands behind, and at her side, dogging her footsteps, with his sneer of retribution and his smile of vengeance, the valet who had claimed her as his wife. There was a moment's silence; then the tongues were loosened, and her friends, and her rivals, and her adorers spake.

"Gad!" quoth my Lord of Morehampton, "she looked quite ugly, 'pon my soul she did, with those great rouge spots on her cheeks. Curse it! how deuced shocking!"

"*Mon Dieu, milord!*" sneered Mademoiselle Papillon, "I congratulate you! Perhaps you will take the rôle of the *third* husband?"

"Better go and be Queen of the Greeks—deuced sharp woman!" said Lee Phillips.

"Always said that creature was a bad lot. Plucky enough, though!" remarked Leslie Egerton, with his cigarette in his teeth.

"The biter bit!" chuckled old Fantyre. "Well, she was very useful to me, but she was always a bad lot, as you say, Leslie; horrid temper! She should have managed her game better. I've no patience with people who don't make sure of their cards! Dear, dear! who'll read me to sleep of a night?"

And the others all crowded round me, dirty old Fantyre peering closest of all, with her little bright, cunning, inquisitive eyes:

"Come, tell us, Chevasney, is it true?"

"I say, old fellow, what's the row?"

So the world talks of us, either in our sorrows or our sins! They were full of curiosity, annoyance, amusement—as it happened to affect them individually; none of them stopped to regret the great lie, to remember the great wrong, to grieve for the debased human nature, and the bitter satire on the Holy Bond of Marriage, that stood out in such black letters in the new story which I added to their repertoire of scandals. *Cancans* amuse us; we never stop to recollect the guilt, the sorrow, or the falsehood that must give them their foundation-stone, their colouring, and their flavour! Mademoiselle Papillon was perchance nearest of all to the moral of the scene, when she shrugged her little plump shoulders:—

"Who would ever dare marry! It is a lottery in which all draw blanks. In love, one is an angel; in marriage a fiend! Paf! who would risk one's neck in its halter!"

CHAPTER XX.

Valet.

THE spring sunshine which lit up the sparkling wines, and glittering toilets, and gorgeous liveries of the fête at Engheim, shining on the Trefusis's parure of amethysts, and on the rich scarlet rouge of her cheeks—that flag of defiance which flaunted there in defeat as in victory!—shone at the same hour through the dark luxuriant foliage of the chesnuts at the Diaman du Forêt in Fontainebleau, on the lilac-boughs heavy with massed blossom, on the half-opened rosebuds clinging round the woodwork of the antique walls, and on the swallow's nest nestled under the broad shadow of the eaves. A warm amber light lay on the earth, and in it the gnats were whirling at their play, and the early butterflies fluttering their saffron wings; whilst the distant chimes of a church clock afar off were ringing the quarters slowly, on the stillness which nothing broke. And out on the dark oaken sill of one of the windows, drooping her head upon her hands, while the light flickered down upon her hair through the network of the leaves, leant a woman, alone; heedless, in the depth of her own thought, of the play of the south wind, or the songs of the birds, as both made music about her. She was alone, nothing near her save the bee droning in the cup of the early rose, or the yellow butterfly that settled on her hair unnoticed. Her head was bent, resting on her hand; her face was very pale, save when now and then a deep warm flush passed over it, suddenly to fade again as quickly; her eyes were dark and dreamy, with a yearning tenderness; and on her lips was a smile, mournful yet proud, as, half unconsciously, they uttered the words

of her thoughts aloud: "I will not leave thee, no, nor yet forsake thee. Where thou goest, I will go; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God!"

They were the words of an oath—an oath to whose keeping she would dedicate her life, even though, to so keep it, that life should be in the world's eyes condemned and sacrificed. She leant there against the dark wood-work, alone, the silence unbroken that reigned about her, save when the wind swept through the fragrant branches above, or the rush of a bird's delicate wings cleft the air. Suddenly—in the stillness, while yet it was so distant that no other ear could have heard it—she caught a footfall, while its sound was so faint that it did not break the silence, as the spaniel catches the step of his master while yet afar off. She lifted her head with the wild, eager grace that was as natural to her as its freedom to a flower, her eyes growing dark and humid in their expectancy, her colour changing swiftly with the force of a joy so keen that it trenched on anguish, with the hot vivid flush of a love strong as the life in which it was embedded and entwined. Then, with a low, glad cry, Alma sprang, swift as an antelope, to meet him, and to cling to him, as she would have clung to him through evil and adversity, through the scorn of shame and the throes of death, through the taunts of the world, and the ghastly terrors of the grave.

For many moments he could find no words even to tell her that which she never dreamed of, that which panted on his lips; he held her in his arms, crushing her in one long, close embrace, meeting as those meet who would not spend one hour of their lives asunder. For many moments he bent over her, speechless, breathless, straining her madly to him, spending on her lips the passion that found no fitting utterance in words;

then, stifled and hoarse in its very agony of joy, his voice broke out:

"You will be my wife--thank God with me—I am free!"

* * * * *

The day stole onward; faintly from the far distance swung the silvery sound of evening bells; the low south winds stirred amongst the lilac-blossoms, shaking their rich fragrance out upon the air; the bees hummed themselves to slumber in the hearts of folded roses; the mellow amber light grew deeper and clearer, while the day was passing onward, ere long to sink into night. And as the rays of the western sun through the parted network of the leaves fell about his feet, shining in the eyes of the woman he loved, and bathing her hair in light where it swept across his breast, De Vigne bowed his head in thanksgiving; not alone for the joy in which his life was steeped, not alone for his freedom from his deadly curse, but for that hour, past yet still so near; so near that still he sickened at it, as men at the memory of some horrible death they have but by a hair's breadth escaped. That hour when, for the first time in all his wayward, headlong, vehement manhood, he had *resisted*; and flung off from him the crime which, yielded to but one fleeting instant, would, though never tracked or known by man, have made him taste fire in every kiss, quail before the light of every day, and start in the sweat of agony, and the terror of remembered guilt from his sweetest rest, his most delicious sleep. That hour in the forest solitude, when goaded, taunted, reviled maddened, he had been face to face with what he loathed, parted by her from what he loved, yet had had strength to fling her from him, unharmed and unchastised.—That hour which had been the crowning

temptation of his life when he had had force to cast it behind him with a firm hand, and to flee from it—fearing himself, as the wisest and holiest amongst us, need do in those dark hours which come to all, when there is but a plank between us and the fathomless abyss of some great guilt.

And while the starlit night of the early summer stole onwards towards the earth, he bowed his head over the woman who had cleaved to him through all, and looking backward to his Past, thanked God.

CHAPTER XXI.

Adieu au Lecteur!

THE history is told! It is one simple enough and common enough in this world, and merely traces out the evil which accrued to two men in similar circumstances, although of different temperaments, from that error of judgment—an Early Marriage. Both my friends took advantage of their liberty, you see, to tie themselves again! I *don't* say in that respect, "Go thou and do likewise," ami lecteur, if you be similarly situated, but rather, if you are free—keep so! A wise man, they say, knows when he is well off.

In "The Times" the other day, I read among the deaths, "At Paris, in her ninety-seventh year, Sarah, Viscountess Fantyre." Gone at last, poor old woman, under the sod, where shrewdness and trickery, rouge and trump cards, are of no avail to her, though she held by them to the last. She died as she had lived, I hear, sitting at her whist-table, be-wigged and be-rouged, gathering her dirty, costly lace about her, quoting George Selwyn, dealing herself two honours and six trumps, picking up the guineas with a cunning twinkle of her monkeyish

eyes, when Death tapped her on the brain, and old Fantyre was carried off the scene in an apoplectic fit; while her partner, the Comte de Beaujeu, murmured over his tabatière, "Peste! Death is horribly ill-bred; he should have let us played the conqueror!"

What memoirs the old woman might have left us; dirty ones, sans doute, but what memoirs of intrigues, plots, scandals, schemes; what rich glimpses behind the cards, what amusing peeps beneath the purple! A great many people, though, are glad, I dare say, that the Fantyre experiences are not down in black and white, and no publisher, perhaps, would have been courageous enough to risk their issue. They would have blackened plenty of fair reputations had their gunpowder burst; they would have offended a world which loves to prate of its morals, cackle of its purity, and double-lock its chamber-doors; they would have given us keys to many skeleton cupboards, which we should have opened, to turn away more heart-sick than before!

Her protégée, the Trefusis, has in no wise gone off the scene, nor did she consent to drop down into a valet's wife. Her exposure at Morehampton's villa had been the most bitter thing life could have brought her, for she had read enough of Rochefoucauld to think with him, "*le ridicule déshonore plus que le déshonneur.*" She sought the friendly shadow of Notre Dame de Lorette. Fearing her husband no longer, she bribed him no more; and if you like to see her any day, walk down the Champs Elysées, or look out in the Pré Catalan for a carriage with lapis-lazuli liveries, dashing as the Montespan's, and you will have pointed to you in a moment the full-blown magnificence (now certainly coarse, and I dare say only got up at infinite trouble from Blanc de Perle and Bulli's best rouge) of the quasi-

milliner of Frestonhills. She has at present, *en proie*, a Russian prince, and thrives upon roubles. Her imperial sables are the envy of the Quartier; and as women who range under the Piratical Flag don't trouble their heads with a Future, the Trefusis does not stop to think that she may end in a Maison Dieu, with a bowl of soupe maigre, when her beauty shall have utterly lost all that superb and sensual bloom which lured De Vigne in his hot youth to such deadly cost.

A young man married is a man that's married.

How can the man fail to be so, who chooses his yoke-fellow for life, in all the blind haste, the crude taste of his earlier years, when taste in all things alters so utterly from youth to manhood? In what the youth thinks so wise, fair, excellent, half a score or a score years later on he sees but little beauty. I have heard young fellows in their college terms, utterly recant in June all they swore by religiously in January, equally earnest and sincere, moreover, in their recantation and their adoration! Taste, bias, opinion, judgment, all alter as judgment widens, taste ripens and sight grows keener from longer mixing amidst the world, and longer studying its varied views. God help, then, the man who has taken to his heart, and into his life, a wife who, fair in his eyes in all the glamour of love, all the "purpureal light of youth," is as insufficient to him in his maturer years as are the weaker thoughts, the cruder studies, the unformed judgment, the boyish revelries of his youth. The thoughts might be well in their way, the studies beneficial, the judgment generous and just, the revels harmless, but he has *outgrown them*—gone beyond them—left them far behind him; and he can no more return to them, and find them sufficient for him, than he can return to the Gradus ad Parnassum of his first school-days.

So the wife, too, may be good in her way: he may strive to be faithful to her and to cleave to her as he has sworn to do; he may seek with all his might to come to her side, to bring back the old feeling, to join the broken chain, to find her all he needs and all he used to think her; he may strive with all his might to do this, but it is Sisyphus-labour; the scales have fallen from his eyes, he loves her no longer! It is not his fault; she belongs to the things of his youth which pleased a crude state, an immature judgment; he sees her now *as she is*, and she is far below him, far behind him; if he progress he goes on alone, if he fall back to her level, his mind deteriorates with every day that dawns! Would he bring to the Commons no arguments riper than the crude debates that were his glory at the Union; would he condemn himself in science never to discard the unsound theories that were the delight of his early speculations; would he deny himself the right to fling aside the moon-shine philosophies, the cobweb metaphysics that he wove in his youth, and forbid himself title to advance beyond them? Surely not! Yet he would chain himself through his life-long to a yoke-fellow as unfit and insufficient to his older years, as ever the theories and thoughts of his youth can be; as fatal to his peace while he is bound to her, as they would be fatal to the mind they dwarfed, to the brain they crammed into a prison-cell!

In youth Rosaline seems very fair,

None else being by
Herself poised with herself in either eye.

A young man meets a young girl in society, or at the sea-side, or on the deck of a Rhine steamer; she has fresh colouring, bright blue eyes, or black ones, as the case may be, very nice ankles, and a charming voice. She is a pretty girl to everybody; to him, she is beautiful—divine! He thinks, over his pipe, that she is just his ideal of CEnone,

if he be of a poetic turn; or meditates that she's "a clipper of a girl, and, by Jupiter! what a pretty foot!" if of a material disposition. He falls in love with her, as the phrase goes; he flirts with her at water-parties, and pays her a few morning calls; he sees her trifling with a bit of fancy-work, and hears her pretty voice say a few things about the weather. A few glances, a few waltzes, a few tête-à-têtes, and he proposes. It is a pretty dream for a few months; an easy yoke, perhaps, for a few years; then gradually the illusions drop one by one, as the leaves drop from a shaken rose, loth, yet forced to fall. He finds her mind narrowed, bigoted, ill-stored, with no single thought in it akin to his own. What could he learn of it in those few morning calls, those few ball-room talks, when the glamour was on him, and he would have cared nothing though she could not have spelled his name: Or—he finds her a bad temper (when does temper ever show in society, and how could he see her without society's controlling eye upon her?), snarling at her servants, her dogs, the soup, the east winds; meeting him with petulant acerbity, revenging on him her milliner's neglect, her maid's stupidity, her migraine, or her torn Mechlin! Or—he finds her a heartless coquette, cheapening his honour, holding his name as carelessly as a child holds a mirror, forgetting, like the child, that a breath on it is a stain; turning a deaf ear to his remonstrance; flinging at him, with a sneer, some died-out folly—"before *I* knew you, sir!"—that she has ferreted out; goading him to words that he knows, for his own dignity, were best unsaid, then turning to hysteria and *se posant en martyre!* Or—and this, I take it, is the worst case for both—the wife is a good wife, as many (ladies say most) wives are; he knows it, he feels it, he honours her for it, but—she is a bitter disappointment to him! He comes home worn-out with the day's labour, but

successful from it; he sits down to a tête-à-tête dinner; he tells her of the hard-won election, the hot-worded debate in the House, the issue of a great law case that he has brought off victorious, the compliment to his corps from the commander-in-chief, of the one thing that is the essence of his life and the end of his ambition; she listened with a vague, amiable, absent smile, but her heart is not with him, nor her ear. "Yes, dear—indeed—how very nice! But cook has ruined that splendid haunch. Do look! it is really burnt to a cinder!" She never gives him any more than that! She cannot help it; her mission is emphatically to "suckle fools and chronicle small-beer." The perpetual drop, drop, of her small worries, her puerile pleasures, is like the ceaseless dropping of water on his brain; she is less capable of understanding him in his defeats, his victories, his struggles, than the senseless writing-paper, which, though it cannot respond to them, at least lets him score his thoughts on its blank pages, and will bear them unobliterated! Yet this disunion in union is common enough in this world, très-chers; when a man marries early it is too generally certain.

A man early married, moreover, is *prematurely aged*. While he is yet young his wife is old; while he is in the fullest vigour of his manhood, she is grey, and faded, and ageing; youth has long gone from her, while in him it is still fresh; and while away from her he is young, by her side he feels old. Married—in youth he takes upon himself burdens that should never weigh save upon middle age; in middle age he plays the part that should be reserved for age alone.

And, to take it in a more practical sense, scarcely the less inevitably from every point is "a young man married a man that's marred." If to men of fortune, with

every opiate of pleasure and excitement to drown the gall and fret of uncongenial or unhappy union, early marriage blots and mars life as it does, how much more bitter still to those who are poor and struggling with the burden of work, hardly done and scantily paid, upon their shoulders, is its fatal error! A young fellow starts in life with no capital, but a good education and a profession, which, like all professions, cannot be lucrative to him till time has mellowed his reputation, and experience made him, more or less, a name in it. It brings him quite enough for his bachelor wants; he lives comfortably enough in his chambers or his lodgings, with no weightier daily outlay than his pipe and his chop; study comes easy to him, with a brain that has no care gnawing on it; society is cheap, for his comrades come contentedly for punch, or beer, and think none the worse of him because he does not give them turtle and Comet wines. He can live for little if he like; if he want change and travel, he can take his knapsack and a walking tour; nobody is dependent on him; if he be straitened by poverty, the strain is on him alone; he is not tortured by the cry of those who look to him for daily bread, the world is before him to choose at least where he will work in it; in a word, he is *free*! But, if he marry, his up-hill career is fettered by a clog which draws him backward every step he sets; his profession is inadequate to meet the expenses that crowd in on him; if he keep manfully and honestly out of debt, economy and privation eat his very life away, as, say what romancists may, they ever must; if he live beyond his income, as too many professional men are almost driven to do in our day, there is a pressure on him like the weights they laid upon offenders in the old Newgate press-yards. He toils, he struggles, he works, as brain-workers must,

feverishly and at express speed to keep in the van at all; he is old, while by right of years he should yet be young, in the constant harassing rack and strain to "keep up appearances," and *seem* well off while every shilling is of consequence; he writes for his bread with the bray of brawling children above his head; he goes to his office turning over and over in wretched arithmetic the sums he owes to the baker and the butcher; he smiles courteously upon his patients or his clients with the iron in his soul and county-court summonses hanging over his head. He returns from his rounds or his office, or comes out of his study after a long day, jaded, fagged, worn out; comes, not to quiet, to peace, to solitude, with a cigar and a book, to anything that would soothe the fagged nerves and ease the strain for an hour at least: but only for some miserable petty worry, some fresh small care; to hear his wife going into mortal agonies because her youngest son has the measles, or bear the leer of the servants when they say "the tax-gatherer's called again, and, please, must he go away?"

Wise are the old words of Walter Raleigh: "Thou bindest thyself for life, for that which will perchance never last nor please thee one year: for the desire dieth when it is obtained, and the affection perisheth when it is satisfied!"

Corregio *literally* dying in the heat and burden of the day, of the weary weight, the torturing rack of home-cares; his family and his poverty dragging him downward and clogging his genius as the drenching rains upon its wings clog the flight of a bird; is but sample of the death-in-life, the age-in-youth, the self-begotten curse, the self-elected doom, that almost inevitably dogs the steps of a man who has married early, be his station what it may, be his choice what it will.

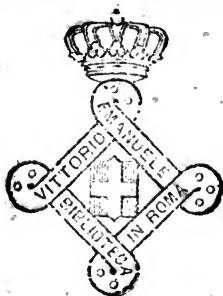
This Spring of Love resembleth
The uncertain glory of an April day,
Which shows now all the beauty of the sun,
And by-and-by a cloud takes all away!

Such is love, rarely anything better, scarcely ever anything more durable. Such are all early loves, invariably, inevitably. God help, then, though we may count them by the myriad, those who in, and for, that one brief "April day," which, warm and shadowless at morning, sees the frost down long before night, pay with headstrong thoughtlessness, in madman's haste, the one priceless birthright upon earth—Freedom!

THE END.

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